

THE CUE BALL THREAT Colossians 3:15

Last year while on vacation one day Laurie and I decided to try stand up paddle boarding. We had seen people trying to do that the couple of days before and I critiqued how well they were doing from the shore. I felt I could do so because Laurie and I had done it the year before with considerable success. In fact I had even withstood an attack by an insane swimmer in the water who told me he tries to knock down at least one stand up paddler every day. So the day we tried the sport again last year we approached it with considerable confidence. It didn't last. We figured the place we were trying it was perfect because it was inside a reef and is normally placid. We failed to notice that a big swell had come in and that day the waves were rolling right over the reef. As we tried to stand up on the boards we found ourselves on boards that were pitching and rolling their way through fairly good sized swells. It was only then that I tuned into the fact that rather than being in fairly deep water with a sandy bottom as we had been previously, we were in a fairly shallow area with rocks and coral below. I struggled mightily. It was more than a little humbling. And quickly my confidence evaporated. Suddenly instead of confidently enjoying a nice paddle on a glorious day, I was mostly grimly determined to not just give up altogether. I should have given up. I ended up with my leg having a close encounter with coral that resulted in an infected wound.

So here's my question: which way would you like life to go? Would you like it to be like that confident paddle on a glorious day, or do you want it to be more like that grim struggle just to not give up? Life has enough challenges; wouldn't it be great if we could go through it with some confidence, with peace? Today we are going to think about peace as we look at Colossians 3:15.

CHRIST CALLS US TO PEACE

We are told here to let the peace of Christ rule in our hearts. The word translated "rule" had the same root as one we encountered back in 2:16 where Paul wrote, "do not let anyone judge you." The root meant "to act as umpire" or "to decide." So we are to let the peace of Christ be the umpire in our lives, to be the one that makes the decisions.

In fact at the end of the verse we see that we were "called to peace." If you asked people what the effect of religion or faith is some would say guilt, some would say make a better person, but I suspect few would say it produces peace. Yet according to this verse that is what we were called to. This is what God says faith in Jesus should produce in people who believe in him. This is a big deal because everyone wants peace. Frederick Buechner said in his book, *Secrets in the Dark*, that in fact it is the treasure that everyone would trade every other treasure for. That's how badly we want peace. ***Every human being longs for peace.*** According to these verses peace should be characteristic of anyone who has responded to God's call. We are called to peace.

Paul was particularly concerned with relational peace between followers of Jesus. In verse 11 we saw that he said in the church there should be no divisions that are so typical of groups of humans. Verses 12-14 were about what we must do to keep that unity. In this verse he mentions that we are “members of one body,” again pointing out that this has to do with relational peace.

However, Paul says we should let the peace of Christ rule in our hearts. Peace begins in the soul of the individual. Internal peace is another essential component to unity. We must be at peace in our hearts if we are going to be at peace with each other. If there is turmoil in our souls it will impact how we treat each other. It will disrupt peace and unity. Lack of peace in the heart of a person will inevitably cause lack of peace in a group of people, even a group as small as two.

Imagine you are going to play pool. You start by racking all the balls so they are gathered together in a tight triangle. Think of this as a church or any group of Christians; it could be a family, all at rest, together, unified. The cue ball is at rest at the other end of the table, but then someone hits the cue ball and imparts energy to it. Think of that energy as lack of peace. The cue ball is fine, peaceful, at rest, but then its peace is disturbed. What happens? It slams into all those other balls with all of its lack of peace. The result is the balls bang off each other and scatter all over the table. That is how lack of peace in just one person can affect a group of people. Behind this week’s premise is that lack of peace in our hearts will produce failure to love.

Imagine a person who has had a day like Alexander’s terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day. Suppose he wakes up late for work and rushes to try to get in as quickly as possible, only to be pulled over by a cop and given a ticket for speeding. He gets to work and promptly spills coffee on himself. His boss hated his proposal, yells at him and tells him if he doesn’t do better he’s going to be fired. As the day goes on he starts feeling that weird tickle and by the end of the day he’s got a full blown cold in progress. He has more awful interactions during the day, and when he comes out to the parking lot at the end of the day he finds that someone has backed into his car and dented it, but left no note. He gets home sick, discouraged, frustrated and exhausted. What does he do when one of the kids spills milk all over the table during dinner? Most likely he erupts; his patience is gone and the frustration of an awful day just explodes. Those who are lacking in peace are highly contagious. They will infect others. It is very difficult to be at peace with a person who is not at peace. He or she will infect you.

Mihaly Csikszentmihaly, psychologist and professor at Claremont Graduate School, says, “Entropy is the normal state of consciousness.” We tend toward disquiet and lack of peace. Frederick Buechner wrote in his book, *Secrets In The Dark*, “part of the inner world of

everyone is this sense of emptiness, unease, incompleteness.” He says it is in everyone. Writer Fran Lebowitz wrote, “there is no such thing as inner peace. There is only nervousness and death.” True peace is rare. There are some in our society who have chemical imbalances in their brain that cause them to ever be lacking in true peace. But for all of us the tendency is in our quiet moments to feel a sense of disquiet, anxiety, often maybe even a sense of failure or fruitlessness.

God wants us to have peace. Romans 15:33 says, “The God of Peace be with you all.” Romans 16:20 also calls God the God of Peace as does 1 Thessalonians 5:23. What do you think it means to say God is the “God of Peace”? Think about some of the ancient mythological gods. If there was a supposed god of thunder, what did that mean? He was the one who produced thunder. A frequent deity in ancient times was the goddess of fertility. That meant she was the source of fertility. So when we refer to the God of Peace we are saying he is the one it comes from. God is the embodiment of peace and he is the source of peace.

In Isaiah 9:6 the prophet said the coming Messiah would be the Prince of Peace. That’s the same idea. In John 14:27 Jesus said, “Peace I leave with you. My peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.” Do you think Jesus has enough peace to give you sufficient peace for your life? His claim was he had enough peace to give us; that we could have hearts that are not troubled or afraid.

Paul wrote, “Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts.” That tells me two things. First, if you are a believer in Jesus the peace of Christ is there. The peace that we all long for is in us. There’s no way it could rule in us if it weren’t in us. Second, we have a choice. We can choose to let it rule or not. We are not helpless. We are not left defenseless before a cruel world that seeks to cause us unlimited anxiety, fear and disquiet. The Spirit of Jesus is in us, and he has total peace. Will we let it rule?

It is important for us to consider where our lack of peace comes from. If God is the God of peace, if he has provided us with his peace and if it is his will that we have his peace ruling in our lives, when we lack peace, when our hearts are disturbed and upset and anxious, we have to ask where that is coming from. Clearly it is not from God. Then where does it come from? We have an enemy who wants us to be miserable. His great desire is that we give no glory to God, and that our lives would be a living hell. So he likes us to be utterly lacking in peace. He does everything he can to throw disquieting thoughts, doubts, fears, nameless anxieties at us. It is crucial when we are experiencing them to remember this is not from God! This is coming from our enemy, and he wants these fears and depressions to rule so that he paralyzes us.

PEACE CONSISTS OF SEVERAL COMPONENTS

Peace with God

It starts here. If we are not at peace with God we will never know peace. All we will be able to do is try to drown out our guilt and our fear. God is the source of peace. If you are cut off from the source of something how much of that resource are you going to have? Obviously you aren't going to have any of it. When Toby worked in IT and he was called by people who had problems, his first question was, "Is it plugged in?" If your printer isn't plugged in, it gets no electricity, and it won't work. If we're not plugged into the source of peace, how much peace will we have? None.

There is great news for us who believe in Jesus. Romans 5:1 says, "since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." Most Christians struggle to believe this. I read recently of a seminary professor at an excellent school who asked his students to write a paper about what gives them the most trouble in their spiritual lives. The most common answer was that they had difficulty believing that God really loved and accepted them. One student expressed it clearly, saying that he felt every time he didn't live up to a high standard, every time he saw something even a little off in his life he felt like God was condemning him and was deeply disappointed in him.

Here's why we struggle. A survey by Lifeway Research that said 28% of evangelical Christians in America agree with the statement, "God loves me because of the good I do." In other words, they are trying to earn God's love. Even those of us who know that's not right, kind of believe it deep down. As long as we think that, we will never be at peace with God. 2 Corinthians 5:18 says, God has "reconciled us to himself through Christ." I don't need to fret over whether I am right with God. I don't have to fret about that *ever*. It is finished. We can put that away and never go back to that question again because God has done the work for us. It is finished.

The biggest producer of peace in our lives is the gospel of grace. It says we have been reconciled. Nothing, I repeat nothing, stands between you and God. Yes, but what about my lack of faith? What about my doubts? What about my failures and shortcomings? I see them and can't believe that God could possibly overlook them. How could he really be pleased with me given all this crummy stuff? Here's how: it has all been reconciled through Christ. God doesn't love us and accept us and delight in us because we have great faith, because we never doubt, because we don't fail but always do what is right. The truth is, if our relationship with God were on that basis we would never have peace. We are far worse than even we are aware. But all of that, every blemish in us, has been paid for.

Back in 2001 Jack Black and Gwyneth Paltrow starred in a movie called *Shallow Hal*. Black played a character named Hal Larson who was obsessed with and only interested in women's physical appearance. But he has an encounter with motivational speaker Tony Robbins, who

hypnotizes him so that he sees women not for what they look like outwardly, but what they are on the inside. He ends up falling in love with Rosemary Shanahan, who is morbidly obese but looks to him like Gwyneth Paltrow. That reminds me of what God has done. It's sort of like he has hypnotized himself so that when he looks at us who believe in Christ, we look to him like Jesus. And he loves Jesus with an infinite love.

In the movie *Money Ball* there's a scene where Billy Beane, the general manager of the Oakland A's, is distressed after the A's had been eliminated from the playoffs by the Yankees. His geeky assistant, Peter Brand, knows they had a remarkable, unexpected season that shocked everyone. He wants to cheer Beane up, so he shows him a video. It is from a game played by an A's minor league team, the Visalia Oaks. It features Jeremy Brown, the huge, lumbering catcher of the team. He's slow and is terrified of being thrown out trying to stretch a hit into a double. In the video Jeremy crushes a ball to deep center field. When he gets to first he does what he never chances, he rounds the bag and heads to second, only his fear gets the better of him. He suddenly jams on the brakes and heads back to first. He dives to the bag and clings to it like a child gripping its teddy bear. Brand says, "This is all Jeremy's nightmares coming to life. Beane says, "Ah, they're laughing at him." Brand says, "He's about to find out why. Jeremy's about to realize the ball he hit went 60 feet over the fence. He hit a home run and didn't even realize it." Beane stares at the screen as Jeremy finally learns the ball went out of the park and he jubilantly rounds the bases. Beane smiled and said, "How can you not be romantic about baseball?!" The point, of course, was that Beane had hit the ball out of the park with a surprisingly successful season for his team. The metaphor for us is that Jesus Christ hit the ball out of the park, so we don't have to fear as we trot around the bases. We are safe with God.

Nothing need ever disrupt our peace with God. Yes, we will fail. Yes we are far from perfect. But God has credited the righteousness of Jesus Christ to us. The result is he delights in us. He welcomes us into his presence. He loves to be with us, and he wants us to be free and joyful in his presence. He wants us to be at peace with him.

Peace about ourselves

One of the greatest disruptions in peace comes from not being at peace with who we are. I have known a couple of people who stand out in my mind because they were not at peace with who they were. They were obsessed with proving themselves worthwhile. In the case of both of them they were difficult to be around because you never knew when you might say something that might cause their carefully constructed image of themselves to be threatened. There was no peace for them ever, because every moment of life held the frightening potential of a threat. And of course they were the classic illustration of the threat of the cue ball. They spread discord and lack of peace everywhere they went.

In an interview with *Rolling Stone* magazine actor Johnny Depp talked about how he feels more comfortable wearing makeup and playing a role. He says, “It’s easier to look at someone else’s face than your own... I think for everyone. You wake up in the morning and you brush your teeth and you’re like, “Ugh, that idiot again. You’re still here? What do you want?! Hiding; I think it’s important. It’s important for you—for whatever’s left of your sanity, I guess.”

Actress Jennifer Lawrence who plays the starring role in the *Hunger Games* movies said in an interview in *People* magazine last year that she has always struggled with feeling insecure about herself. “In middle school there are all these peers judging you and you’re never good enough, never wearing the right outfit, saying the right thing. I want everyone to like me. Who doesn’t? Then you grow up and become famous and it’s the same thing multiplied by a billion.” Yikes. Middle school multiplied by a billion. That sounds wretched. That’s the blessing being successful and famous brings.

Have you ever had this happen? You meet someone new, perhaps a new person at church. You chat with the person and are glad they’re here, want to make them feel welcome. Minutes later your spouse says, “So I saw you talking to that new couple. What were their names?” And you have no idea. We’ve all done it. We are so consumed with making a favorable impression, so obsessed with ourselves that we don’t even listen when we hear their names. This is an example of the fact that if we are concerned with ourselves, with trying to prop up an image of ourselves or feel good about ourselves, we are not going to be thinking of how we can serve someone else.

Read the gospels and watch how Jesus interacts with people. He never shows an ounce of insecurity. His image of himself is never threatened. He never gets defensive with people. You can get a glimpse of the same idea with Paul when he said in 1 Corinthians 4:3, “I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court.” In other words, he was secure in who he was and was not especially concerned about what people thought of him.

Remember verse 12. We are chosen, holy, and beloved. God loves you, just as you are. He accepts you, just as you are. Furthermore he has set you apart, declared you to be special, to have a vital and eternally significant role to play in this world. Psalm 139:13-16 says to God, “you created my inmost being, you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place. When I was woven together in the depths of the earth, your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.”

Do you hear what that says? You are not a mistake? You are not one of those factory seconds they sell at discount stores. God knew exactly what he was doing. I wish he had

made me taller, given me more hair, made me wittier, made me more intelligent, made me definitely more athletic. Just generally I wish he had made me more impressive to other people. But what that Psalm says is God made me exactly the way he wanted me. No one else would have fit the plan he has for me. And that is true for all of us. Do you know that full well? When we come to grips with this truth, when we believe it in our hearts we find peace and freedom from the horrible tyranny of fear of the opinions of other people. Without that we will never be free.

We have difficulty grasping the truth that ultimately what God thinks is all that matters. We think if we could only get enough approval from people, then we would finally be at peace with ourselves. But the words of Johnny Depp and Jennifer Lawrence prove that wrong. They are rich, successful, famous, admired the world over, and they are insecure and hiding. Other people can never give us peace with who we are. That only comes from God.

Peace about our circumstances

This one really trips us up. We are not at peace because we fear what might happen. We long to be free of that fear and to be at peace no matter what may be happening in our lives. We want what Psalm 91:10-12 seems to promise. If you trust in God and make him your refuge, then “no harm will overtake you, no disaster will come near your tent. For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways; they will lift you up in their hands so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.”

We all want that “no harm will overtake you” part. That says nothing bad will ever happen to you. In fact, verse 12 says the angels will see to it that you don’t even stub your toe. That sounds perfect. Nothing bad will ever happen and I won’t even suffer a minor injury like a stubbed toe. That’s exactly what I want.

The only thing that can make me totally at peace in the world is when I am safe, meaning nothing is going to hurt me. Our kids love the ride at Disney’s California Adventure Park called, “The Tower of Terror.” Should we be surprised that a ride with the word “terror” in its name doesn’t create a sense of peace? You are strapped into a seat on a platform in the dark that they raise up, and then with no warning drop it. It feels to me like it drops several thousand feet. They do this a series of times, only it is run by a computer program so that every time you ride it the sequence is different. I know intellectually that the ride is safe, but I hate that falling feeling. Every time I have it in a dream I jerk awake. So on that ride I am never at peace. I white knuckle my way through it, thinking the whole time, “Please let it stop.” I avoid that ride the way I avoid cilantro, which is to say with deep and fervent dedication. When you don’t feel safe you’re not at peace.

I know we all want that kind of promise from God because most of the time when a believer has something terrible happen to him or her the reaction is, “why didn’t God protect me?”

There is a sense that God hasn't kept his part of the bargain, he's not doing his job. So I read that passage in Psalm 91 and think that's just what I want. I trust God to fulfill that promise, and then comes the horrible shock. God hasn't come through. I have suffered injury. I've got a broken toe that proves I've stubbed it. I suffered painful harm in this world, harm that God's angels easily could have protected me from.

Do we say there must be something wrong with me because the promise didn't work for me? Maybe God isn't protecting me because I have failed to obey him and deserve the bad things that have happened to me. But that is totally out of line with the message of the gospel of grace. Another problem is that I don't know anybody who has gone through life with nothing bad ever happening to them. In fact, some of the most godly people ever to live have suffered calamities. I would hardly describe the lives of Peter, John and Paul, for instance, as never having any harm befall them.

Then compare this understanding of Psalm 91 with some other parts of the Bible. In John 16:33 Jesus said "in this world you will have trouble." 1 Peter 4:12 says, "Do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering." The New American Standard translation more literally puts that "do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal you are suffering." Those verses tell us that trouble in this world is inevitable! So how do we reconcile that with Psalm 91?

Psalm 91 is poetic. It uses imagery to teach truth, imagery that is not intended literally. Verse 13 says, "You will tread upon the lion and the cobra." In other words, step on a lion out in the wilderness or accidentally put your foot down on the back of a venomous snake and it will be no problem. The snake can't hurt you. Um, yes it can and it will. So this is poetic hyperbole, an expression intended to make us feel a truth, but it is not to be taken literally. If you go tread on a lion I don't care how much faith you have or how godly you are, the result is likely to be unpleasant. This poem is telling us that God is protecting us in ways we're not even aware of and is seeking our good, but the fact remains bad things can happen to us.

Christians can lose their jobs, get terrible diseases, suffer painful accidents. We have just learned of the bad news Kim Fox has heard that she has potentially very dangerous cancer. She is a godly woman who has been faithfully serving the Lord for years alongside her husband. And yet she is now dealing with this terrible disease. Bad things can and do happen to followers of Jesus. So how are we to have peace? It cannot be found in believing that nothing bad will ever happen, because it can and will.

What does God actually promise us that can give us peace? First we have to interpret in light of all that God says. One perspective that becomes totally clear in the New Testament is that God takes the long, the eternal view of life. In other words, the real harm that we fear is eternal harm. Remember that much of the Old Testament uses physical pictures to

communicate spiritual truth. God promises that his people will enter the Promised Land. That was a physical picture of spiritual truth that we can enter the eternal Promised Land by faith in Jesus Christ. So we understand the poem of Psalm 91, while cast in concrete physical terms, pictures the truth that we need fear no real (that is, eternal) harm. God will keep us safe for our eternal future.

The Scriptures tell us that the harm we should fear most is spiritual. In Matthew 10:28 Jesus said, “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul.” The greater peril is danger to our soul. God promises he will protect us spiritually and we need fear nothing.

Well is there anything that can help me with the difficulties of this life that cause me anxiety? Yes, there is. First that God will be with you. Jesus said in Matthew 28:20 that he would be with us always. He will never abandon us. 1 Peter 5:10 says God is able to “make you strong, firm and steadfast.” Ephesians 6:13 says if you put on the full armor of God you will be “able to stand your ground. “Here’s the truth: if your soul is strong you can withstand anything! I’ll say that again. ***If your soul is strong you can withstand anything!***

Furthermore, we can know that no matter what happens in our lives God is using it for some good purpose. Remember Psalm 139:16. It said all the days ordained for you were written in God’s book before one of them came to be. God has a plan for you and nothing is going to derail it. He cares about you and will see to it that your life will fulfill his purpose for it, a purpose you will rejoice in.

So here's what we can count on:

- God ensures that our eternal destiny is never in doubt, and this is what matters most. 2 Corinthians 3:16-17 says We do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away (bad things happen) yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us eternal glory that outweighs them all."
- God protects us from the spiritual harm that is far worse than what we usually feel. The threats to our souls are infinitely more frightening than any of the woes we typically grow anxious about.
- God guarantees that any of the troubles and woes we face on this earth are not meaningless, but serve a glorious purpose.
- God is with us to encourage and strengthen us and guarantee that nothing we face can defeat us.

I have mentioned before a young guy I encountered late one night when a flight we were on, the last flight out that night, was canceled due to mechanical problems with the aircraft. There were a couple of hundred people stranded at an airport after midnight with everything pretty much shut down, not knowing what to do and what was going to happen. There was no panic, but there were a lot of unhappy and very tense people. I would not describe it as a scene full of people at peace. It was far from that. But this one young man who was heading to his home 5,000 miles away was calm, totally at peace. I was standing next to him as we were waiting for the airline people to tell us what they were going to do with us. As I chatted with him I told him I couldn't help but notice that he didn't seem even a little tense about the situation. It turned out this was the first trip he had ever taken on an airplane. For him all of this was brand new. For all he knew this was just how it goes when you fly and he figured it was just part of the adventure. So he was calm, just fascinated by the process and said, "I'm happy to see how it all works out!" He was confident the airline would eventually get him safely home.

Wouldn't it be great to go through life like that guy? No matter what happened just to be calm, figuring what is happening is just part of the adventure and being happy to see how it all works out. For some time I thought he had that attitude because this was his first time flying and for him it was a big adventure. But upon further reflection I realized that's not the real story. The fact is that it would not be unusual for someone in his situation to be totally freaked out by it. Never having flown before he could easily have feared that he was going to be stranded there or have to pay some sort of exorbitant fee to find some way to get himself home. Not knowing what was happening could easily have caused him to panic, and we know that there are many people that would in fact freak out. That tells me there was something about that guy that enabled him to be so at peace through that circumstance.

I have now concluded that it had to do with how he viewed the situation. He trusted the airlines and he saw it as an adventure. If we trust God is going to get us where we need to go and if we can view the thing as part of the adventure, we can have that same calm positive spirit. If your peace is built on being completely safe and secure in this life, you will never have a moment's peace. There is no such thing as total safety and total security against any harm or disappointment in this world. If that's what you require for peace you will ever live in fear.

Francis of Assisi said, "Lord, make me an instrument of your peace." Rather than being cue balls that scatter everyone, let us be instruments of peace. It starts with peace in our own souls, peace with God, with who we are, and with whatever may happen in our lives. Wouldn't it be great if in a world that is an ocean of chaos, tumult, dissension and fear, we could be islands of peace. What a refuge we would be for others. God has called us to peace!