



SERMON TITLE: "Peace in the Fire"

DATE: November 22, 2020

SCRIPTURE: John 16:25-33

PASTOR: Jim Thompson

"These things are written that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ" (John 20:31). This is how John concludes his biography of Jesus. He wanted the young, the old, the sick, the well, the despairing, the hopeful, the skeptics, the faithful, and whoever reads his account of Jesus to believe and trust him more fully. But what did John want them to believe? He wanted them to believe that Jesus alone brought eternal life into the present, broken world. And for all who enter this eternal life with God right now, we—like John—are exiles. For all who enter a relationship with Jesus, we will very likely be marginalized and dismissed because we follow him. So, what does it mean to believe? And how do we mature in believing? What does it mean to remain faithful to God when the pressure is on? These are the things that John will help us explore by showing us the glory and beauty of Jesus.

Polycarp was disciplined by John the Apostle, the same John who wrote the Gospel of John. And Polycarp lived long enough to face heated persecution at the hands of the Roman Empire. On one Friday night in the town of Smyrna that John mentions in Revelation, while Polycarp was in his 80s, Roman guards barged into his house to take him away. Strangely, Pastor Polycarp welcomed them in, and asked if they wanted anything to eat or drink, and also asked them if he could have an hour to pray before they took him away. After he prayed, they took him away.

Polycarp was brought before a council that threatened Polycarp him: "All you have to do is swear allegiance to Caesar. All you have to do is say 'Caesar is Lord,' and we'll let you go free." But Polycarp refused. The council got louder, "Revile Christ! Deny him! And if you don't, we'll have you killed!" Polycarp replied, "For 86 years I have been his servant, and he has done me no wrong. How can I now blaspheme the King who saved me?" And with these words, the Roman leader sentenced him to be burned alive.

On the way to his execution, a mob gathered, even bringing wood from their own homes for the fire. Once everything was ready, they took off his clothes and tied him to the stake. When bound, Polycarp looked to heaven and prayed aloud, "O Lord God Almighty, God of all Creation, I bless you because you have counted me worthy of this day and hour so that I might receive a place among the martyrs in the cup of your Christ, to the resurrection of eternal life, of both body and soul." Indeed, I praise you and glorify you, through the heavenly high priest, Jesus the Christ, Your Beloved Son, through whom be glory to you both now and for all the ages to come, Amen." And when he was finished praying, they lit the fire.

Polycarp had something worth living for and something worth dying for, and he had something that not even suffering could take from him. So, what do we make of his example? How can we have peace like that? How can we have composure and conviction like that? And further, for Polycarp, it didn't come out of nowhere. It was grown over time, deep in his soul. He had it on good days and bad days and on his last day. So, how do we get there?

How do we develop trusting and unflinching peace?

Enter John 16:33. This verse marks the conclusion of the longest teaching section of Jesus in the entire Bible. And notice how Jesus closes this entire section: "I'm telling you all this *so that* in me, you may have peace." This is what Polycarp had and what we need! And with these words, one could easily argue that the main point of everything Jesus has said for almost four chapters is that we can have peace. Needless to say, this verse demands exploration, and this exploration will help us answer our question. Let us, therefore, consider three ideas from this verse: 1) "In me, there's peace," 2) "In the world, there's tribulation," and 3) "Take heart, I've overcome the world."

1) "In me, there's peace."

When Jesus says that there's peace in him, he's implying that there's no more peace in the temple, the sacrificial system, or the Law. There's no more peace in priests, in holding up your Jewishness as a badge of honor, and by all means, there's no peace if you politically cozy up to the Roman Empire so that you'll get persecuted less. Jesus is definitively saying that the peace is *in him*. And this peace is not the absence of war. In the Bible, peace ("shalom" in Hebrew, "Eirene" in Greek) is wholeness, oneness, harmony, and togetherness. It's life the way God intended. It's what Adam and Eve experienced when they walked with God in the Garden. Peace is relational security. Peace is Polycarp saying, "Do whatever you have to do. God hasn't failed me, and he won't fail me." That's peace in the Bible.

In life, there always seem to be places where we lack peace. Whether it's relationships, work, parenting, marriage, physical pain, or anger at God, Jesus' words here are as simple as they are liberating: "In me." That's it. "In me, you can have peace." It's available, it's possible, it's within reach. And yet, we still often exhaust ourselves trying to do it on our own or find it somewhere else. And here, Jesus is asking his friends to trust him and rely on him wholeheartedly, and he asks the same to us. But there's a catch. There's something that stands in the way of having and experiencing that peace...

2) "In the world, there's tribulation."

John only uses the word "tribulation" twice in his gospel account, and both are in this chapter. The word is about pain, pressure, or suffering. Sometimes it's translated as "affliction" or "trouble." So, Jesus is making a contrast here. "In me, there's peace" is in contrast to "In the world, there's tribulation." It's not about having peace in general, but about having an unwavering and unflinching peace as we live in the world that's trying to suffocate us.

Further, "the world" in John is a specific idea. It's the broken order of things. It's sinful people putting in place corrupt systems to gain meaning and purpose independently. It's the Tower of Babel. That's what John means by "the world." And there are two great evils when it comes to "the world." One, when followers of Jesus try to make the world their primary source of comfort and peace, it belittles the peace offered to us in Jesus. And two, when the world is the source of actual pressure or persecution, we're wrong to run away from it. If we do that, we operate out of fear. But the whole point of Jesus' peace is that it can give you calm and shalom in the middle of whatever life throws at you. The peace you get from escaping a problem is usually just a natural consequence. Still, Jesus is saying that he came to give sanity *in* suffering, joy *in* sorrow, clarity *in* uncertainty, and peace *in* the fire. Meaning,

Gospel peace doesn't run from pain; it reinterprets it.

Why? Because peace that is lasting is relational and not circumstantial. Trusting and following Jesus is not temporal, but tribulation is. The good news of Jesus offers us a peace that isn't rooted in our feelings, reputation, situation, who's in office, or whether or not we're scheduled to be burned at the stake. And therefore, it allows us to change how we understand about life. Because of Jesus, we get to reinterpret all tribulation as yet another way to sense his love, his grace, his forgiveness, his guidance, and the hope we have because of him.

3) "Take heart, I have overcome the world."

This is the biggest reason why we can have unflinching peace right now, and not just one day when we die; because Jesus has overcome the world. The word "overcome" in verse 33 is special. This is the only time in John's gospel that he uses the word. It means victory. It means the bad guys are defeated. They've been conquered. It was originally a military term. But the primary way that John uses this word is of the victorious Lamb in Revelation. And how is the Lamb victorious in Revelation? Not by political force or violence, but by means of his sacrificial death. And this is not a random Lamb. This is the Passover Lamb. So, it's no accident that the last thing Jesus says to his friends on Passover night is "Take heart, I've overcome the world," because he knows what's about to happen. He knows that his cross and resurrection will make it make sense.

And this is how we can heed his final command, "Take heart." Some translations say, "Take courage." The King James Version says, "Be of good cheer." It means: "Be brave. Have composure and conviction. Have hopeful boldness. Jesus wins!" And this is exactly what Polycarp did. He imitated Jesus by obeying him, and thus "took heart."

Not only was Polycarp disciples by John, some say for up to 20 years, but the unbelievably high likelihood is that John disciples Polycarp as he was working on his biography of Jesus that is in our New Testament. So, the chances are that they would talk about following Jesus using the exact same terminology that John uses in his gospel. In fact, the name Polycarp in Greek means "much fruit" (from John 15). Additionally, when Polycarp is told that he is going to be burned alive, it says that he was filled with joy (like 16:21) and with "take heart" (like 16:33). This is exactly how Jesus approached his own death; it's how Polycarp faced his, and it's how Jesus is inviting us to approach all of life. When we "take heart," we experience the peace that Jesus wants for his people. Today he tells us...

Take heart, I know what you're going through even more than you do, and I am with you. Take heart. I am more compassionate than you are weary and tired. Take heart. There is hope in the middle of and on the other side of the pain you feel. Take heart. I am with you when you're scared, when you're alone, and when you're angry. Take heart, your sin is no match for my grace, and I love loving you. Take heart, sin isn't your master anymore, death is defeated, and hell doesn't win. Take heart. I was separated from the Father so that you could be brought in and belong to his family. Take heart. The kingdom is here. The tomb is empty. New Creation has begun. Take heart. I have overcome the world.

This is the entire basis for peace. Jesus has overcome the world. And the peace he offers is so strong that it can withstand, outlast, reinterpret, and be humbly confident in the face of any fire that burns around us, and that is a gift like no other.

Discussion Starters —

- What is the most moving and/or interesting thing to you about Polycarp's story?
- What should be included in the Bible's definition of peace?
- Who is someone you know who has an unwavering peace?
- What does Jesus mean by "in the world, you will have tribulation"?
- Why does tribulation make peace hard to feel?
- What does it mean that Jesus has "overcome the world"?
- What stood out most to you about this message?
- How should Jesus' command to "take heart" take shape in your own life?