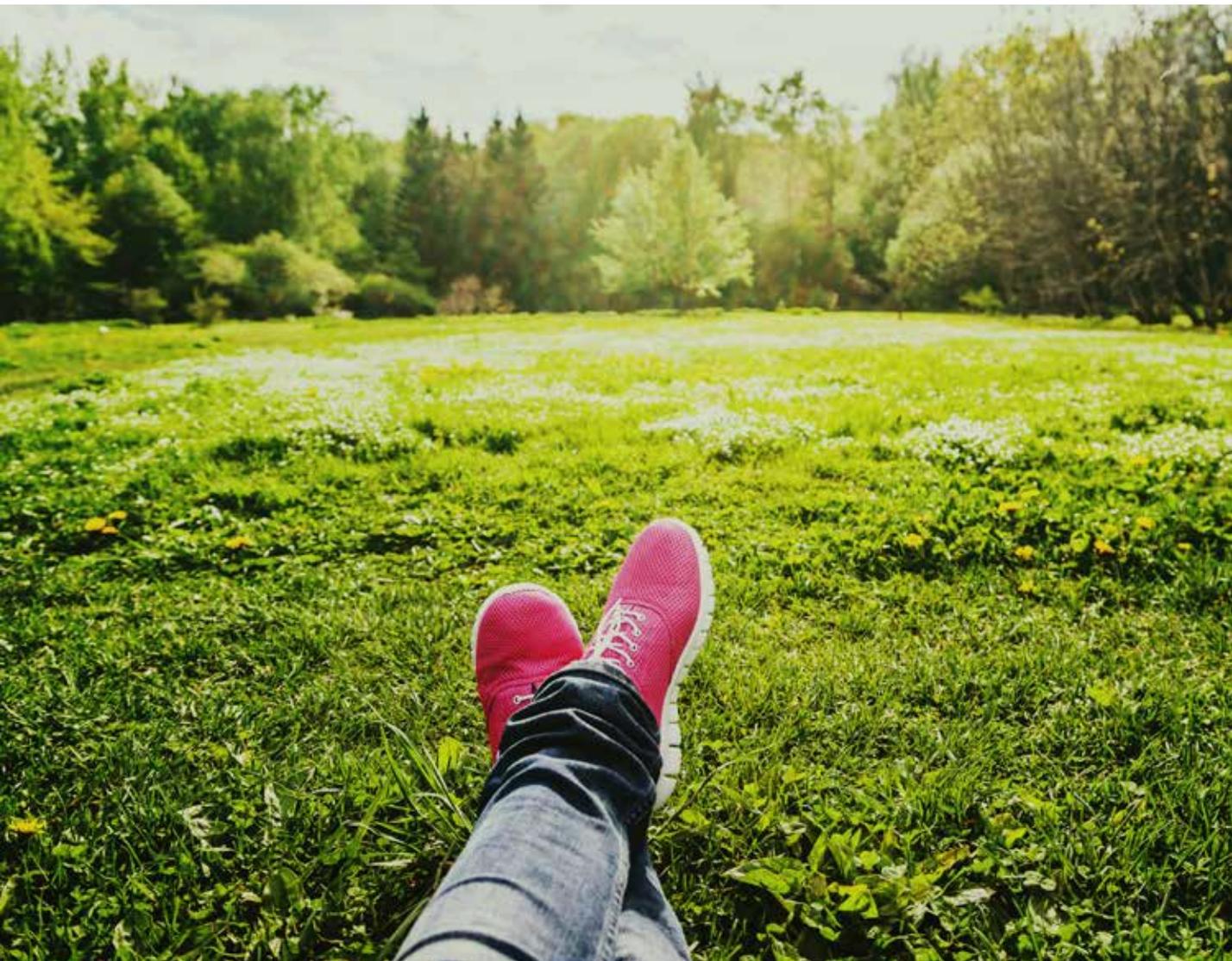


4

OUR PEACE



Where do you go when you need some peace and quiet?

QUESTION #1

THE POINT

God's peace helps us rise above our circumstances.



THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

I grew up in a time when “peace” was a popular slogan, but it was also an excuse for a way of life that was often anything but peaceful. It’s hard to imagine anyone who wouldn’t want peace, but the daily news feeds make us painfully aware that peace is severely lacking: wars and skirmishes around the world; riots on college campuses; and political unrest in our communities. We long for authentic peace.

Peace is not simply something needed “out there.” We need peace in our churches, our homes, and our own hearts. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if we could live with an absence of conflict in our lives, a time with no squabbling or obstacles? Even when we experience moments of “peace and quiet,” they are often short-lived.

Peace is possible, and it is a peace that is far more than just an absence of conflict. The Old Testament judge Gideon lived in a time of conflict, but he discovered a peace in the midst of his circumstances. He discovered he could trust God to give peace because He is our Peace.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

Judges 6:11-13

¹¹ The angel of the LORD came and sat down under the oak in Ophrah that belonged to Joash the Abiezrite, where his son Gideon was threshing wheat in a winepress to keep it from the Midianites. ¹² When the angel of the LORD appeared to Gideon, he said, “The LORD is with you, mighty warrior.” ¹³ “Pardon me, my lord,” Gideon replied, “but if the LORD is with us, why has all this happened to us? Where are all his wonders that our ancestors told us about when they said, ‘Did not the LORD bring us up out of Egypt?’ But now the LORD has abandoned us and given us into the hand of Midian.”

It’s one thing to be in the same room with people, but it’s quite another for the people in that room to enjoy peace and unity. That was the case with the tribes of Israel. In the Book of Judges, the Israelites had entered the promised land, and the land had been divided among the tribes of Israel. But even though Israel occupied the land, no longer were the people united in heart and mind. They had lost the sense of being a unique people; they had compromised God’s standards. The closing verse of the Book of Judges well summarizes this period: “Everyone did as they saw fit” (21:25).

The Book of Judges is marked by a cyclical pattern: sin and rebellion, followed by punishment, then followed by a season of repentance and deliverance. The deliverer was usually an anointed “judge”—a leader provided by the sovereign hand of God. The judge would bring deliverance and spiritual renewal would come to the people for a season. Then the cycle of sin and punishment would be repeated. Ultimately, Israel lost the fruit of their land and labor.

Here the Israelites were again in the sinful phase of this cycle, so God disciplined them by allowing the Midianites to oppress them. The Israelites called out to God in their despair and the Lord sent a prophet.

Where do you see people questioning God’s goodness and presence today?

QUESTION #2

God in His mercy was prepared to send a deliverer. Without fanfare, we are told that the angel of the LORD sat under an oak tree as Gideon was beating out wheat in his winepress. This surely was an odd place to thresh wheat, but Gideon was hoping to hide from the Midianites. It seems even stranger that the angel called Gideon a "mighty warrior." After all, he was at that moment in a wine vat hiding from the enemy.

Gideon was focused on the difficult circumstances. He called into question the presence and power of God and asked why so many bad things were happening to Israel. His thinking was simple. If God was with them, the Midianites would not be pillaging their fields. The people of Israel would not be living like animals. He was correct in thinking God's people should not be living in defeat, but he was wrong to conclude their situation was due to the Lord's weakness.

Gideon's second question was similar to the first: "Where are all his wonders that our ancestors told us about?" The Israelites frequently rehearsed the story of God's redemption and provision. They knew God had delivered Israel from bondage and miraculously saved them at the Red Sea and throughout the wilderness experience.

Like Gideon, when we focus on our circumstances we can't properly see God's hand at work. The result is a lack of peace and contentment.

Judges 6:14-16

¹⁴ The LORD turned to him and said, "Go in the strength you have and save Israel out of Midian's hand. Am I not sending you?" ¹⁵ "Pardon me, my lord," Gideon replied, "but how can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family." ¹⁶ The LORD answered, "I will be with you, and you will strike down all the Midianites, leaving none alive."

GOD OUR PEACE

Which of the following images reflect anxiety you've experienced in life?



How has God brought peace to you or others you know in some of these circumstances?

*"Thou hast taught me to say,
'It is well, it is well with my soul.'"*

—HORATIO SPAFFORD

The Lord didn't directly answer Gideon's question or respond to his accusation that He had abandoned them. Instead, He gave Gideon a commission to "Go in the strength you have and save Israel out of Midian's hand. Am I not sending you?"

But instead of responding in humble gratitude for the privilege God had given him, Gideon attempted a second strategic end run. This time he questioned his own ability. These responses sound much more pious and humble. "Pardon me, my lord ... but how can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family." While his protest may sound humble, it was simply an excuse and an affront to God. Gideon focused on his perceived shortcomings, but God had created Gideon and had specifically chosen him for this task.

God's response to Gideon was firm but reassuring. "I will be with you." When God calls us to a task, He assures us of His presence and His power to enable us to accomplish our assigned mission. God accompanies us as we follow Him. This has been God's pattern and plan throughout time. The Great Commission is accompanied by the promise, "I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matt. 28:20).

Gideon asked for a sign. He brought an offering and the angel touched it with the staff in his hand. As a result, fire sprang forth from the rock, consuming the offering. (See Judg. 6:17-21.) No doubt, the consuming fire leaping from a rock was a great clue for Gideon that he had received a message from God.

***How do we recognize
when God is calling
us to a task?***

QUESTION #3

Judges 6:22-24

22 When Gideon realized that it was the angel of the LORD, he exclaimed, “Alas, Sovereign LORD! I have seen the angel of the LORD face to face!” 23 But the LORD said to him, “Peace! Do not be afraid. You are not going to die.” 24 So Gideon built an altar to the LORD there and called it The LORD Is Peace. To this day it stands in Ophrah of the Abiezrites.

In the Old Testament, “the angel of the LORD” often referred to the presence of God Himself. So when the angel of the LORD disappeared right after causing Gideon’s offering to be miraculously consumed by fire (see vv. 17-21), Gideon realized he had been in the presence of the LORD. His response was one of holy fear.

In that moment, Gideon realized he was in God’s favor. Trouble was all around because of the Midianites, but God was with him—and that was all the assurance and peace he needed. In grateful response, Gideon built an altar and named it “The LORD Is Peace”—*Jehovah Shalom*.

The Hebrew word *shalom* is usually translated in English as “peace.” *Shalom* is one of the most significant terms in the Old Testament. The fundamental idea conveyed by the word *shalom* is wholeness in one’s relationship with God. It defines a harmony in the relationship based on completing a transaction. In our relationship with God it means a sense of contentment, freedom from guilt, and satisfaction with life itself. Of course, this does require that we must have a pure heart before God and live in obedience to His Word and His plan.

We might wonder how we, with our human failings, can ever be at peace with a holy God. We can only answer that question by understanding the full significance of the name *Jehovah Shalom*. The prophet Isaiah wrote that a child would be born who would be called Prince of Peace. (See Isaiah 9:6.) The Prince of Peace died to reconcile sinful individuals to our holy God. Jesus is our peace; He tore down the wall that separates us from God and from others. (See Eph. 2:14.) Jesus is *Jehovah Shalom*!

How has God used our group to help you find peace in life?

QUESTION #4

How can our actions and attitudes demonstrate that we serve the God who is our peace?

QUESTION #5

LIVE IT OUT

God's peace allows us to rise above our circumstances. How will you display that truth this week? Choose one of the following suggestions.

- ▶ **Receive Jesus as your Prince of Peace.** If you have never experienced God's peace, admit your sin, turn from it, and turn to Jesus by faith. Then you will live in peace with God.
- ▶ **Enjoy true *shalom* in your relationship with God.** If you have received Christ as Savior but are not experiencing wholeness, you may be stuck in a cycle of sin. Ask God to show you any areas of spiritual neglect and disobedience. Confess them, turn from them, and turn back to Him.
- ▶ **Live at peace with others.** Jesus our Peace has broken down all dividing walls. Is there a broken relationship in your life that needs to be made whole? Go to that person in the power of Christ and seek forgiveness and reconciliation.



The world rightly lifts up peace as a virtue. But the peace that comes from *Jehovah Shalom*, God Our Peace, is a peace that truly passes all human understanding.

My thoughts