



## GRACE AND PEACE

**Colossians 1:1-2**

October 5, 2009

Dr. Todd Wilson, *Senior Pastor*

### Introduction

Well I came across a wonderful word this week—Weldtangst. Has anybody heard this word? You may not have heard of it but I suspect you might suffer from it. Weldtangst! Can I show you a picture of weldtangst? This is the Chicago Tribune from this week Tuesday—the fellow with his face in his hand and you can see the caption: The House of Representatives says “No,” fear grips investors. How low will it go? The lowest drop in the market ever! The Dow plunges 778 points—the biggest point drop ever as bailout deal is rejected. Fear grips investors—and fear grips more than just investors. Fear grips many, many of us. Weldtangst! I’ll give you another picture of veldt angst. This is from The Economist magazine. The title is “World on the Edge.” Here’s a little fellow standing on the side of a precipice and the precipice is starting to crack and he’s about ready to plunge. World on the Edge!

Weldtangst is a German word and the German language has this wonderful way of bringing together whole phrases into single words. “Weldt” means “world” in German; “angst” means “fear, anxiety”—world anxiety, or rather, anxiety about the world and anxiety about one’s place in the world. That’s weldtangst. And weldtangst looks like a national epidemic these days in the United States and around the western world. These are anxious times, it seems to me. Several weeks ago Forbes magazine identified Chicago as the most stressed out city in United States. Evidently Mayor Daley’s response was “Urrrgh!” But then he went on to say in light of the kind of interaction he has with reporters, “Yeah, I can understand why they would say that.” And isn’t stress an expression of anxiety so often? If you’re suffering from anxiety about the world or about your place in the world then I think you’re going to find this series in Colossians very timely indeed. Why?—because peace is the purpose of Colossians. And peace is the antidote to anxiety: anxiety about the world and anxiety about one’s place in the world.

### Peace is the purpose of Colossians

Peace is the purpose of Colossians, and you say, “How do you know that?” We’ll you can see right there in the letter introduction these first few verses:

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, to the holy and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae: Grace and peace to you from God our Father.

Colossians 1:1-2

So peace is the purpose of Colossians and of the letter. We see it in the letter’s introduction, “Grace and *peace* to you...” So don’t skip over the introduction of a letter because it’s telling you what God himself wants to speak into your life and into my life as we come under the teaching and the preaching of his word. In the book of Colossians, he wants to speak grace and peace, the purpose of the book of Colossians.

And we know peace is the purpose of Colossians because peace is the purpose of Paul’s apostleship. Paul is the author of this letter. Paul identifies himself as “an apostle of Christ

Jesus.” What is an apostle? It’s a messenger who is sent out by God to proclaim a message. What is the message Paul is proclaiming? Well one of his favorite text that shaped his self-identity as an apostle of God is from Isaiah 52. This is a significant passage for Paul that shaped his understanding. When he met Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus, was converted and sent out as an apostle to the gentiles, this passage came to mind and, I think, shaped his identity in his self-understanding. Paul quotes the familiar words in Isaiah 52:7 in various places in his letters, talking about messengers being sent out after God has accomplished his great victory, his deliverance and salvation for his people. This is what Isaiah is talking about—he is going to send out messengers to proclaim the victory that he has accomplished. Of course the victory that God has accomplished now is sending Jesus Christ, Jesus’ death and resurrection, and then he gathers apostles and sends them out with a message, and that message is in Isaiah 52:7. Let’s look there:

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who bring good news,  
who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness, who publishes salvation . . .

You can see them from afar. Here they come running; you can see their feet, they are running. That’s how you know they are coming. Their feet are running and how beautiful are those feet when the messenger comes running. And what does he proclaim? He proclaims peace, good tidings—salvation. So, one way to think about the apostle Paul as an apostle of Christ Jesus is that he was a messenger of peace. That’s how to think about his whole ministry. What was Paul doing running around the Mediterranean world travelling over ten thousand miles during his ministry, his missionary enterprise, going all around what is modern day Turkey, Greece and Italy, even making his way to Spain? The shipwrecks, sufferings and persecutions and we know about how Paul was beat up for going around proclaiming peace. Ironically enough, as he writes this letter, he is not proclaiming about grace and peace from a cushy lazy-boy chair. Where is Paul pronouncing grace and peace from? Prison! Take a look at the end of the letter, the last verse of the letter:

“I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. Remember my chains. . .”

and do you see what he says next? “Grace be with you.”! Paul’s apostleship was an apostleship of peace. He was sent out to be a messenger of peace to proclaim these good, glad tidings.

So we know that the purpose of Colossians is for peace; it says it in the letter’s introduction; it’s part and parcel of Paul’s apostleship. Stepping back even one step further, we know that peace is the purpose of Colossians because peace is the purpose of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The God of peace sent forth the Prince of Peace to proclaim and embody the Gospel of Peace. We think of Luke chapter 1, for example, where we have Zachariah, John the Baptist’s father. Zachariah’s response when he hears of the birth of John the Baptist was, in Luke 1:76-79

And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High;  
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,  
to give knowledge of salvation to his people  
in the forgiveness of their sins,  
because of the tender mercy of our God,  
whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high  
to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,  
to guide our feet into the way of peace.

What then is the purpose of the gospel, of Paul's apostleship, the purpose of Colossians? Peace! Peace is what the Colossians need to hear, to hear from God a word of peace, and it's what many of us need to hear as we struggle with "weldangst," the anxiety about the world and our place in the world.

### **Peace is the Longing of these Postmodern Times**

So I think we are going to find that our study of Colossians is timely indeed! Perhaps even more importantly, and here is my second point, is that we are going to find that our study of Colossians is not only timely but profoundly relevant. Why? Because peace is the longing of these postmodern times. You've heard the word "postmodernism"? It's a buzzword these days, "We live in these postmodern times." Post-modern, that is, not just after modernism but a sort of reaction to modernism. Postmodernism has impact on the culture as well as the society—arts, literature, music and architecture and so on, as well as on the way we design and organize ourselves socially. It's a big, intimidating word. We will talk more about postmodernism as this series develop. One definition I came across was this, from a famous French philosopher who coined the term and developed it first. He gave this definition; see if it helps you. He said, "Postmodernism is incredulity towards all metanarratives." Does that help you? If that leaves you incredulous, I can understand. Often as in the case with concepts like that, it's easier to point than to define, to point to examples than it is to define. So let me just point to a few examples so you can picture postmodernism.

The first example is from the upper echelon of society, from a fellow by the name of Richard Rorty, who is a professor of humanities at the University of Virginia, one of the leading philosophers and one of the most provocative and influential philosophers alive in the United States today. He wrote a book called "Contingency, Irony and Solidarity." What he does in that book is to sketch out what he calls the portrait of "liberal ironist." Stick with me; you're going to need to grab hold of this so when you leave the door and go look around out into the world, it will make a lot more sense to you. The "liberal ironist" is the sketch of the consummate postmodern person. Here is how he describes the "liberal ironist." He says,

Liberals are people who think cruelty is the worst thing we do (p.xv).

That's a liberal, one who thinks that cruelty is the worst thing we do to one another: oppression, violence, ostracism on the basis of class, race, gender or ethnicity, or sexual orientation, or age. "Ironist" is from irony, of course. An ironist is a person who faces up to the contingency of his or her own most central beliefs and desires; someone who has abandoned the idea that those central beliefs and desires refer back to something beyond the reach of time and chance" (xv). Do you see what he is saying? An Ironist is someone who realizes that, yeah, I'm a Muslim, but that doesn't sort of reach back beyond just the contingencies of time and place. I just happened to be born in a Muslim home. I just happened to be born in Saudi Arabia. That's why I'm a Muslim. It's just sort of time and chance. Why are you here this morning? You are a Christian with deeply held beliefs and desires and a view of the world. Why do you hold those? Is it because it reaches back in time and space to reality or truth itself? Or is it that you just happened to be born in a Christian home, showing up at Calvary from Sunday to Sunday? Perhaps you weren't born in a Christian home, you bumped into a Christian who shared the gospel with you in the corner booth of the MacDonal'd's restaurant and somehow all these forces came together and you now hang out with Christians and you are a pastor—something that doesn't reach beyond anything other than time and chance. That's a liberal ironist.

Now listen to what he says about liberal ironist. He says, “These are people who include among these ungroundable desires their own hope that suffering will be diminished, that the humiliation of human beings by other human beings may cease” (xv). That is a description of a postmodern person; those committed to seeing the humiliation of people by other people cease. You don’t hear the words of peace but do you hear the longing for peace? So, that’s the portrait of the postmodern person.

Let me give you the portrait of the postmodern community. Let me bring this a little closer to home. Peace is the longing of these postmodern times. That’s the consummate postmodern person. Here is the portrait of the postmodern community. I went to the Village of Oak Park website and I got the diversity statement; I downloaded it and printed it off. So, we just heard about the consummate postmodern person and now here is the consummate postmodern community. Now hang in there; when you leave these doors and look around the world it would make more sense if you track with what I’m saying to you here. In no way am I trying to knock this; I am trying to point out the underlining longing in it. So if you are here and have a deep commitment to Oak Park, and you maybe were on the committee that wrote the diversity statement, I’m not knocking it. I am standing with you, so to speak, resonating with the longing for peace in this document. So let me read the Diversity Statement:

The people of Oak Park choose this community, not just as a place to live, but as a way of life. Oak Park has committed itself to equality not only because it is legal, but because it is right; not only because equality is ethical, but because it is desirable for us and our children. Ours is a dynamic community that encourages the contributions of all citizens, regardless of race, color, ethnicity, ancestry, national origin, religion, age, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, marital and/or familial status, mental and/or physical impairment and/or disability, military status, economic class, political affiliation, or any of the other distinguishing characteristics that all too often divide people in society.

Do you hear the word “Peace” in there, the longing for peace? Tired of racism; tired of two World Wars that are the crowning achievement of the modern mindset. Tired! Tired of the sexism that has oppressed women and so on. Tired of it all and longing for peace.

Oak Park’s proud tradition of citizen involvement and accessible local government challenge us to show others how such a community can embrace change while still respecting and preserving the best of the past. Creating a mutually respectful, multicultural environment does not happen on its own; it must be intentional.

And how does a community of peace happen, friends? Listen:

Our goal is for people of widely differing backgrounds to do more than live next to one another. Through interaction, we believe we can reconcile the apparent paradox of appreciating and even celebrating our differences while at the same time developing consensus on a shared vision for the future.

Do you hear that? All this sort of theology and worldview built into that Diversity Statement? Through interaction, we will come to respect one another, and agree and learn from each other and have the kind of mutual understanding.

So I have given you two portraits; portrait of a postmodern person and the portrait of a postmodern community to make the point that peace is the longing of Postmodernism. Let me just say a few things about this. (1) You won't understand postmodern times unless you understand this underlying longing for peace that drives the entire outlook. You won't understand the world in which we live unless you understand this aspect. (2) This is important for us: we as Christians must not scorn or despise, much less mock these longings for peace we see expressed in these postmodern times because it *should* be our longing too. We should not mock these expressions of longing for peace. And then (3) we must however continue to *humbly insist* it is the *Gospel alone* that actually can accomplish real peace.

### **Peace is the Achievement of Grace**

And this leads to my third and final point. The first point is that peace is the purpose of Colossians. The second point is that peace is the longing of these postmodern times, and my third point, and the most important point, is that peace is the achievement of grace.

Some of you may be wondering, "Why did he entitle the sermon Grace and Peace? He's been talking about peace the whole time." What is the relationship between grace and peace? Grace is the *gateway* to peace. Grace is what ushers *in* peace and brings peace about. Peace is the achievement of Grace and that is why it is only in the gospel that we can find true and lasting peace—not through dialog, not through diversity, not through interaction, not through tolerance which is just a parody on Grace. Do you see that? The world's parody on the gospel's Grace is tolerance. Trying to bring about a peaceful community through tolerance and diversity—two-thirds of one, one third of the other, stir it together and you have a peaceful community. That's not the way the gospel operates. The gospel brings peace.

So while the Oak Park Diversity Statement says through interaction we will be able to reconcile differences into a happy communal enterprise and realize our vision for the future, what does the gospel in Colossians say? Look at verses 19 and 20. It's not through interaction; it's not through endless dialog and conversation and respecting differences, so to speak. Here is where we find how peace is actually accomplished and attained.

For in him (that is, Jesus Christ) all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through *him* to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making *peace* by the blood of his cross.

Peace is the accomplishment of grace and we cannot find grace anywhere else but in the gospel of Jesus Christ, the shed blood of Jesus Christ. We won't find grace out there in the world. We will find grace there at the communion table. That is where grace is to be found, in the shed blood of Jesus Christ. So as we draw near to the communion table, let us remember where grace is to be found. And let us be a community of peace as we come and commune with God and with one another together. Let us heed the word of Colossians 3:15 where Paul says to the Colossians, "Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts." Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts as our lives are ruled by grace.