

# Memorial Day: Remembering What's Needed for Peace

(Jesus) came closer to (Jerusalem), and when he saw it, he wept over it, saying “If only you knew today what is needed for peace! But now you cannot see it!...because you did not recognize the time when God came to save you.” (Luke 19:41-42,44bTEV)

Two years after Pearl Harbor exploded into World War II, amid the tentative joy of a Thanksgiving furlough and the fear of a planet ablaze, I was conceived. From the womb, I learned that war is not an option, but the reality of life in this world.

Once, as a boy, I found my mother's high school yearbook, and was puzzled by tiny red-ink marks alongside a number of her senior classmate photos, all of them young men. “Those are the ones,” she sighed, “who didn't come back.” Visiting my Navy officer father at the base one day as a first-grader in 1949, I was surprised to see one man with an artificial arm and claw-hook apparatus where his hand had been. “He lost his arm fighting in the war,” Dad noted respectfully.

In the movie *Flags of Our Fathers*, four WWII servicemen are chosen to travel the country campaigning for War Bonds. When introduced as “war heroes,” the first scoffs at the applause, “The real war heroes are the ones who didn't come back.”

I suspect that a true combat veteran would not be an enthusiastic military recruiter. War survivors, in fact, are often reluctant to speak of what they've seen and done, because they know that otherwise comfortable civilians cannot understand it—or perhaps, they are so humbled by surviving it that they don't want to draw attention to themselves. Soldiers returning from war often seem overwhelmed and unable themselves to make sense of it all, as if begging someone to show them the meaning if not redemptive lesson in such awful destruction.

The sheer magnitude of their sacrifice demands a public respect. But if not by applauding the soldiers, how then do we properly honor today those who have fought in past wars?

A soldier who has experienced the horrors of war would likely value peace more passionately than someone who hasn't. Insofar as soldiers fight wars in order to bring peace, clearly, the way to honor war veterans is to work for peace by learning and applying the lessons of war—that is, in Jesus' words, by knowing what's needed now for peace and doing it. That's what honors a fallen soldier. That's what tells him, “We're building on your sacrifice to save others from the hell of war.”

A world history stained with the blood of warmaking, testifies that we haven't done that. Today, Memorial Day arrives with little fanfare beyond an appliance sale at Sears, and leaves with few memories beyond a picnic at the park. And even before the ants have attacked the chicken salad, another soldier dies.

“Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it,” as the philosopher Santayana said. Those who cannot see what is needed for peace, as Jesus put it, are condemned to yet further destruction.

To honor members of the Armed Forces who fought their appointed battle in the past, frees us from repeating their ordeal in order to face and fight our appointed battle today. To celebrate Memorial Day, therefore, is to work for a peace deeper and more lasting than mere quiet.

And this, in fact, is Jesus' focus as he weeps for Jerusalem. His word "peace" is the Hebrew "shalom," meaning not simply the unfocused *absence* of conflict, but rather, the overcoming *presence* of God—which insures freedom not to get on with our future ambitions, but at last, to fulfill His purposes both now and in the future.

The active presence of God among us will always stir a battle, because we not only have a sinful human nature that wars against His rule, but also a spiritual enemy dedicated to sabotaging it.

Here, then, is what's needed for peace today: that we recognize God has sent Jesus as Commander-in-Chief of His forces to save us from the evil that has overrun this world and captured our hearts.

That's why Jesus weeps, not just for Jerusalem but for every city and town in the world where people continue fighting and destroying each other, doing the Evil One's work instead of welcoming God's work.

Because human life is the greatest possible sacrifice, fallen soldiers deserve no less than our pursuing the greatest possible victory. In order to do that, we must learn the most basic lessons of war, that is, we must face the most basic and pervasive of wars--the cosmic battle, in fact, which Jesus has not only revealed, but won. We must recognize that God has sent Jesus among us to recruit, train, and guide disciples to walk out His victory against the manifest power of Evil.

Many in our scientific culture see the notion of a living, active force of Evil as primitive, irrational, and irresponsible. But the God revealed in Jesus has little time for such distraction, and even weeps for those seduced by its sophistry away from His saving hand. In the original Greek manuscript, the Lord's Prayer itself begs God to "deliver us from the Evil One"—not, as our materialistic Western worldview has arrogantly domesticated it, "deliver us from evil." Again, John declares, "The Son of Man came for this reason, to destroy the devil's work" (1John3:8b).

What's needed for peace is to confess this truth and to cooperate with Jesus in accomplishing it. This we can do, because Jesus has not only borne on the cross the consequences of our turning away from God, but because through his sacrifice, the Spirit of God who animated him has been poured out upon all humankind. The Good News is not only that we have been forgiven our wrong-doing, but empowered to walk out His right-doing, not only healed, but commissioned.

To refuse that commission to battle God's spiritual Enemy in the power of His Spirit, is to trivialize the countless soldiers whose past sacrifice has afforded us this perspective and this calling today. Waving flags on Memorial Day, giving speeches, laying wreaths, praying with thanksgiving, even taking a day off to enjoy our hard-won freedom, are all fine. But let us never forget that the Evil which stirs the destruction of war is not subdued merely by the cessation of outward hostilities, but only by recognizing in Jesus "the time when God came to save you." From murder and violence, to addictions and family division, the battle yet rages in our human hearts and relationships.

Because others have died in our defense, we yet live. The parallel to military sacrifice and that of Jesus cannot be overlooked. This Memorial Day follows upon Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit was poured out upon the Jesus-Believers. Our God is alive, and His overcoming power among and within us is real. It's time to receive and release the fullness of His Spirit so we can battle the power which animates all evil in this world. In this, our sacred calling, let us not fail those who have fallen in our behalf—even Jesus.