

Memorial Day: *Remembering What's Needed for Peace*

Two years after Pearl Harbor exploded into World War II, amid the 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 asked her about the tiny red-ink marks alongside a number of her senior classmate photos, all of them young men. "Those," she sighed, "are the ones who didn't come back." Visiting my Navy officer father at the base one day as a first-grader in 1949, I was startled to see a man with an artificial arm and claw-hook 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 travel the country campaigning for War Bonds. When introduced as "war heroes," the first scoffs at the applause, "The real heroes are the guys who didn't come back."

War veterans, in fact, are often reluctant to speak of their terrible experience, whether because they know that otherwise comfortable civilians won't understand it, or they're so humbled by surviving it that they don't want to draw attention to themselves—or they simply struggle to find some redemptive lesson in such awful destruction and personal loss.

The sheer magnitude of their sacrifice, meanwhile, demands a public recognition. But if the living don't want applause and the dead can't receive it, how then do we properly honor war veterans today, especially those who "didn't come back"?

I suspect that no one who has faced the horrors of war would be an enthusiastic military recruiter—and in fact, would likely value peace more than any civilian. Honoring veterans on Memorial Day, therefore, might appropriately begin with committing ourselves to a peace deeper and more lasting than mere quiet.

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 new refrigerator has been installed, yet another soldier dies.

Jesus spoke into to this dilemma as he left the peaceful hinterlands of Galilee to enter the embattled city of Jerusalem: "When he saw (Jerusalem), 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)

We honor war veterans, therefore, by learning and applying the lessons of war—that is, as Jesus put it, by seeing now what's needed for peace and doing it. That's what honors a fallen soldier. That's taking the baton from dying hands and running the next lap. It promises, "Your sacrifice has enabled us to face and uproot the deeper causes of war in behalf of future generations."

I therefore dedicated my last book, *Fight like a Man: Redeeming Manhood for Kingdom Warfare*, "to members of the Armed Forces who fought their appointed battle for peace in the past, so we might have the security to fight our appointed battle for peace today."

Jesus focuses our battle today as he weeps for Jerusalem. His word “peace” is the Hebrew “shalom,” meaning not simply the passive *absence* of conflict, but rather, the active, overcoming *presence* of God. Paradoxically, however, God’s deliberate presence among us always stirs a battle, because we not only have a self-centered 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 this broken world where people continue fighting and destroying each other, focusing on the Enemy’s work of death and blind to God’s work of life.

Because human life is the greatest possible sacrifice, fallen soldiers deserve no less than our pursuing the greatest possible victory. To do that, we must face the greatest of wars, namely, the cosmic battle between Good and Evil, which in fact, underlies all human conflict—and which Jesus has not only revealed, but won. We must recognize that God has sent Jesus to recruit, train, and lead us into His saving victory against the overwhelming power of Evil both within us and without.

A culture which hides its spiritual poverty behind material affluence will distort the truth of a living, active Evil as a primitive, irrational, and irresponsible notion. But the God revealed in Jesus has little time for such denial and indeed, 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 arrogant Western worldview has 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 the resurrected, living Jesus in accomplishing it. This we can do, because Jesus has not only borne on the cross the crippling consequences of our proud turning 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 the Cross, but the resurrection; not only that we’ve been forgiven our wrong-doing, but empowered to manifest His right-doing; not only that we’ve been cleansed, but also commissioned.

To refuse this, our sacred commission to spiritual warfare, is to discount the soldiers whose past sacrifice has afforded us the freedom to face and wage it. Waving flags on Memorial Day, giving speeches, laying wreaths, praying with thanksgiving, even taking a day off to enjoy such hard-won freedom, are all fine. But we trivialize the occasion if we fancy that the battle against Evil is limited to armed international conflict alone. From crime and disease to addictions and family division, it yet rages in this broken world—as in our imperfect human hearts.

This Memorial Day, let’s take our cue from the soldiers who came back, and adopt their humility—not thankful that others died instead of us, but opened by the mystery of our deliverance to the timeless battle in every human heart and circumstance. In that humility, let’s confess that indeed, we live amid both good and evil spiritual powers far greater than our own, and that we’re delivered from the Evil One not merely by the cessation of outward hostilities, but only by recognizing in Jesus “the time when God came to save you.”

Because others fought and died in defense of our country, we yet live. Indeed, soldiers who die fighting for peace and freedom beckon the larger reality of God’s ultimate sacrifice on the cross. As we enjoy the benefits of their sacrifice, may we receive and exercise the boons of Jesus’--namely, the resurrection power of the Holy Spirit to discern and overcome Evil.

In this, our sacred calling, we honor those who have fallen in our behalf—even Jesus.