

What Is Peace?

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Date: 05 August 2018

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[0 : 00] I'd like to just remind ourselves of the angelic messages that occurred when the shepherds were keeping their flocks at night. This is Luke chapter 2 at verse 8. You'll remember the story, of course, that there was an angel who gave a message and then the angelic host spoke.

And there were shepherds living out the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.

But the angel said to them, Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David, a Savior has been born to you.

He is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you. You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger. Suddenly, a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace to men on whom his favor rests.

Especially this afternoon, I'm interested in exploring what this word peace means in verse 15. And the declaration of peace that the angelic host gives to the shepherds, and by application gives to us.

[1 : 23] I think we've been used to, at least in these last few years, from 2014 now through 2018 and on to 2019, we're used to anniversaries of the First War, the First World War, the Great War.

It was also known as the War to End All Wars. There's another anniversary I'd like to remind you of, and this occurred in August of 1928, 90 years ago.

There was a gathering of 15 nations initially, and these 15 nations agreed. It's interesting to get such agreement. They gathered and they agreed to a declaration.

It had been drafted by the American Secretary of State, Frank Kellogg, and the French Foreign Minister, Aristide Briand. And this pact became known as the Paris Pact, or the Kellogg-Briand Pact, or the General Treaty for the Renunciation of War, as an instrument of national policy.

So these 15 nations, and just to give you an idea of which nations they were, some of the names or terms are a bit quaint today. Australia, Belgium, Canada, Czechoslovakia doesn't exist anymore.

[2 : 38] France, Germany, British India, the Irish Free State, Italy, Japan, New Zealand, Poland, South Africa, United Kingdom, the United States.

So these 15 nations agreed in August of 1928 that as of the summer, or July of 1929, that this pact would come into effect.

And by 1929, a total of 62 nations signed up to outlaw war. What a remarkable development. What a remarkable concord that 62 nations, major nations, came to this agreement that war was no longer to be an instrument of national policy.

Now I said a moment ago that we sometimes referred to the 1914-1918 war as the Great War or the War to End All Wars. Generally now we refer to that war differently, don't we?

Because in 1939 there was another worldwide conflagration that got the name of Second World War. So we refer to the 1914-1918 war as the First World War.

[3 : 49] And the War to End All Wars was no longer an applicable title for that war because yet a greater war occurred. Now if you think that worldwide conflagrations are the only expression of war, I look today on the Global Conflict Tracker.

It's quite sobering reading. I guess you can find anything on the internet. But this global tracker lists 25 existing world conflicts. Some of them are longstanding.

The border between Pakistan and India, that's a hot topic. Palestine and Israel, that seems to be rumbling on for, again, the last 70 or so years.

But there are conflicts probably that you're not aware of, I certainly wasn't aware of. Growing destabilization in Mali, Democratic Republic of Congo, the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan,

just to name a few.

So you go back to 90 years ago and this enthusiasm that we as a concert of nations could outlaw war. And the Kellogg-Briand pact was really an expression of optimism and hope.

[4 : 59] But the sad reality is that the nations of the world were unable to achieve their end. They had a noble desire. Let us abolish war. Let's make it illegal.

The United States Senate passed that act by 85 to 1. The U.S. Senate never passes measures by that majority. So there was an enthusiasm.

There was a hope. But the reality of this world meant that the Kellogg-Briand pact proved to be unsuccessful. Japan signed.

Germany signed. Italy signed. And not many years later, the world was again plunged into international war. Now, 2,000 years ago, in a very obscure place, it wasn't the leaders of the world. It wasn't the kings and the princes and the prime ministers and the presidents. But it was an unusual audience of shepherds that they received angelic messages.

[6 : 00] You'll notice that the first message was a universal message. The one angel said something that was true for everyone. Do not be afraid.

I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. The message of the gospel is a universal declaration of good news. Every man, woman, child has good news found in the arrival of Jesus Christ.

The arrival of Jesus Christ, the incarnation, has transformed human history as we know it. So the individual angel gives a message for all.

But then we have an even more remarkable cycle. Angelic messengers are quite rare in the Bible. They don't happen on every page. But by comparison, appearances of the angelic host are incredibly rare.

We get some glimpse of the angelic armies in the Old Testament. We get a glimpse of the angelic host or the company of angels in the book of Revelation. But here we have the angelic host speaking, again, not to the kings, not to the presidents, not to the prime ministers, but to shepherds.

[7 : 17] Now, the angelic host has a message, but it's not a message for all. It's a message for some. Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.

And this is one of the conundrums, or this is one of the, call it the dichotomies of the gospel. That the gospel is good news for all, but the benefits of the gospel is only good news for some.

So the arrival of Jesus brings hope to everyone, all people, all nations, man, woman, child, you name it. But the benefits of the gospel only belong to some.

Remember the great proclamation of John 3, 16, for God so loved the world. That's all. Every one, every nation, every people. God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whoever believes in him will not perish, but have everlasting life.

The gospel declaration for all, the gospel benefits for some. And the angelic hosts are declaring peace. They are declaring peace, but only peace to those upon whom the favor of God rests.

[8 : 33] The benefits of the gospel only come to those who enjoy the favor of God. With you this evening, I'd like to explore what this word peace really means and what it implies and why we can say that Jesus Christ, he himself is our peace, the language that the apostle Paul uses in Ephesians.

So if you think of the Bible as a big book with a big story, every story has a beginning and every story has an end. The beginning of our story is all good.

There is harmony and peace. And this word peace, the Old Testament word is shalom. It's not just an absence of war, but it's a presence of harmony, wholeness, completeness.

You go back to the beginning and that's exactly what the world was. The world was at peace with its creator. The world was at peace with itself. And the people, the human couple, Adam and Eve, they had harmony with one another.

So there's a perfect peace that existed in those first few chapters of the Bible, the beginning of the story. And then you skip to the end of the story, the final two chapters, Revelation 21 and 22.

[9 : 51] And that peace, which was lost through the fall, that peace is restored, regained and renewed so that there is a perfect harmony restored to this world.

A perfect harmony restored between God who created, God who sustains, God who redeemed, and the new inhabitants of this regenerated and renewed world.

So if you understand the beginning and the end, you understand that peace was there at the beginning, peace will be there at the end. But today we are desperately seeking this kind of harmony and this kind of wholeness.

So when the fall happened, those relationships were broken. Those vertical relationships between the creature and the creator were broken.

And broken by sin, broken by rebellion. That we declared war against God. And by our declaration of war, we lost all that we had.

[10:50] That's the great theme of Paradise Lost, Milton's poem that he wrote those many years ago. This paradise, this glory, this relationship, this harmony was shattered because of human sin.

So the relationship vertically between us and God. The relationship horizontally because the first thing that we see when Adam and Eve sin is the first argument between human beings.

Adam blames Eve, Eve blames a serpent. And we see that even the peace that was there between man and woman and the created world was lost.

So peace at the beginning, peace at the end, but no peace now. We are looking, we are searching, we are striving for peace. There is something within the human heart, something within the human psyche that strives to see peace on earth.

And yet every effort fails and falls short. Whether the efforts of war to bring peace or the efforts of legislation to bring peace, we simply cannot do it.

[11:57] And yet God in his grace and in his power declares peace. It's said that humanity, mankind has the ability to declare war, but only God can declare peace.

As we consider the angelic proclamation, notice first the proclamation puts God at the forefront. And God is always at the forefront.

That the message of the gospel is a benefit and blessing to us, but the gospel is a proclamation first and foremost of the glory of God. The grace of God, the power of God, that we see the manifestation of God in his glory, in the arrival of the Son, the incarnation, the outpouring of the spirit of Pentecost.

That God takes center stage. We don't take center stage. He takes center stage. He deserves all praise. He deserves all honor. He deserves all glory.

And the benefits percolate down to us. He gets the glory and we receive the blessings. We receive the benefits. So long as his favor rests upon us.

[13:08] Now with that angelic proclamation ringing in our ears, the angelic host appearing to these shepherds at night, one angel terrified them. The whole angelic host must have petrified them.

Turn with me just for a few moments to Ephesians chapter 2, where we began our reading. The apostle Paul addresses the human situation.

And he addresses the twofold problem in turn. Ephesians chapter 2 divides into two parts. This is one example where the division, chapter division, is helpful because verses 1 to 10 deal with the vertical problem.

The problem that you and I have as members of the human race because we are out of relationship with our God and creator. We're told that the world, the flesh, and the devil have dominion until we see the intervention of God, his grace, his power, and his glory.

So the apostle Paul describes us in verse 1, as for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins. The Bible is unhesitating in its insistence that you and I are sinful in nature, sinful in action, and our sinful actions, our sinful nature, alienates us, separates us, and makes us spiritually dead.

[14:35] Spiritually dead people have no capacity to do anything. Spiritually dead people have no capacity to achieve anything. We cannot please God. We cannot honor God.

Why? Because the God who created us, the God who sustains us, spiritually speaking, we are dead and insensitive. We cannot hear him because our ears are deaf. We cannot see him because our eyes are blind.

We cannot feel him because our hearts are stone. And we cannot understand him because our minds are dull. That is the reality of human nature apart from the grace of the gospel.

But we see this transformation in verse 4. So we're dead. We are under the authority, under the power, under the condemnation of this world.

But because, in verse 4, of his great mercy, because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ.

[15 : 32] Even when we were dead in transgressions, it is by grace you have been saved. We have caused the problem. The solution will not come from us.

The solution must come from God and has come from God. So the declaration was accompanied by action. The angels prefigured or prefaced or previewed the coming Jesus to say, you have not seen anything yet.

The apostle Paul writing after the arrival of Jesus is reflecting upon that great act of grace on the part of God.

That we dead are now made alive. How? By Jesus Christ. God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus.

So Jesus is the key. Jesus is the key to our justification, our regeneration, our renewal. The only way that dead people can be made alive is if we have faith in the dead man, Jesus, who was raised back to life.

[16 : 41] The savior of the world, the son of God who came on a mission. He came to seek and he came to save. So he paid the price. He bore the cost. We receive the benefit.

So the apostle Paul is addressing the vertical problem. The separation that is caused by spiritual deadness. God is alive. We are dead. God speaks.

We can't listen. God demonstrates his glory. We just can't see it. We can't understand it and we can't respond to it. But God makes us alive in Christ.

And these great words in verse eight, for it is by grace you have been saved through faith. And this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God. Not by work so that no one can boast.

How do we know if the favor of God rests upon us? How do we know if that angelic declaration of the host is ours? How do we know if we have the favor of God?

[17 : 38] The favor of God is found only in the Son. And having faith in the Son brings that favor, brings that blessing, brings that benediction that the angelic host gave to the shepherds 2,000 years ago.

But what does this vertical relationship, this restored relationship with God look like? Well, Paul not only gives us a theology, he gives us the practice. He said, for we are God's workmanship created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

Now, this whole theme of gospel and good works has bedeviled the church of God for hundreds of years. People say, well, what is it? Is it the gospel, what Jesus has done by grace, or is it good works?

Well, the apostle Paul makes it quite clear that it's not by our works, but by his work. It's not us, it's him. And yet, in Christ, we are now created.

We are now equipped. We are now enabled to do good. Previously, we were dead, incapable, unable to do anything good. Now we are alive.

[18 : 54] Now the relationship has been restored, and we should naturally want to live, to please God, to do what is right, to do what is good, to demonstrate the grace of God in our lives and in our actions, the reality of Jesus in our lives.

So peace with God is that vertical relationship restored. But the apostle Paul reminds us that the peace that Jesus brings is not just vertical.

And this is the challenge, I think, that we, in our reformed strand of the Christian church, need to take to heart. Because we rejoice in the gospel.

We rejoice in the work of Christ. We rejoice in what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. But does that make us a people who are instruments of peace?

Remember Jesus said, blessed are the peacemakers? Do we have this realization that if we receive a vertical peace with God, that that then finds a translation into our horizontal relationships?

[20 : 05] Sadly, we find that many folks who rejoice in the gospel find it absolutely impossible to maintain positive relationships with people. But the apostle Paul says the two have to go hand in hand.

And that's why the second half of chapter 2 in Ephesians is so critical. And that's why the word peace is constantly being spoken by the apostle Paul. Because he describes the separation.

Verse 12, he says we were separate from Christ. Remember, he's largely speaking to a Gentile audience, a Greek audience. Separate, excluded. Foreigners, without hope, and without God.

That's what we were. But what are we now? Now in Christ Jesus, you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ. So the vertical relationship has been restored.

And now the horizontal barriers that separate people have been destroyed. There is no longer two people, Jews and Greeks, Jews and Gentiles. There now is one people of God.

[21 : 15] So today we need to see an expression of peace. Not just in our dealings with God. Not just in our appreciation of the gospel. But we need to see an expression of peace in our relationships with one another.

Because Paul goes on to say, for he himself, Jesus, is our peace, harmony, wholeness, fullness, completeness. Who has made the two, two different peoples.

One, who has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility. By abolishing in his flesh with his commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace.

And in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross by which he put to death their hostility. So there's a two-fold hostility, isn't there?

There's a hostility that exists between people and God. The cross deals with that hostility. Jesus deals with that hostility. And there's a hostility that exists between people.

[22 : 24] And Jesus deals with that hostility. And his cross deals with that hostility that he, on the cross, bore the cost, paid the price, so that we can be brought to God and that we can be brought together.

Is that visible? Is that obvious? Would somebody observing the church of Jesus Christ identify this reconciliation between people?

Do we demonstrate in our lives and do we demonstrate in our character and our behavior that we are indeed one people? Oh, there's diversity, different cultures, different backgrounds, ages, education, all different things that could be distinctive.

There's nothing wrong with having distinctives that I look different than you or I act, you know, we have different cultures, different ways of speaking. There's nothing wrong with that. But there's a unity that should permeate the people of God, that the distinctions and differences that separate people in the world should not separate people in the church of Jesus Christ.

So rich people should worship God alongside of poor people, people from all different backgrounds and all different races and all different cultures, that all those hot spots in the world that we should see visible demonstrations of the grace of God in healing relationships among people.

[23 : 46] So peace is not achieved through war. Peace is not achieved through declaration or legislation. But peace is achieved by Jesus Christ on the cross. Peace with God and peace among people.

Because the Apostle Paul goes on to say, his purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace.

And in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. Sin brings separation.

Gospel brings reconciliation. When we come to the New Testament, we realize that there is not one word that can adequately describe the gospel, that can adequately summarize the benefits of the gospel.

We need a whole dictionary. We need words like reconciliation, as well as justification, as well as sanctification, regeneration, renewal. And we need this word, peace.

[24 : 50] And these different words have different contexts. Very often we find ourselves using the language of the courtroom, which is also Paul's language, the language of justification of being declared righteous.

And that is the cornerstone or the hallmark of our gospel. But we also need to use language of relationships, of reconciliation, of peace, of two peoples becoming one, of distinct people groups becoming united together in Jesus Christ.

Because Jesus came in verse 17, and he preached peace to you who were far away, and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one spirit.

Came to this country 28 years ago. I don't know if this is still required, but within seven days I was required to appear at the police station down at FEDIS, police headquarters, Edinburgh.

And I had to register as an alien. I had to get a little card with my picture in the card and a stamp that said that I am a resident alien here in the United Kingdom. I don't have that card anymore because I'm a citizen now.

[26 : 02] I'm a citizen of this country. I don't need to register as an alien because I have all the rights and responsibilities as a citizen. We once were aliens. We once were foreigners.

We once were cut off. But we're now part of God's kingdom, part of God's household. And if we are made citizens of his kingdom, and if we are members of his household, that brings a relationship on the human level between every other member of that household, every other member of that kingdom.

I didn't choose who was going to be a member, who was going to be a part of the United Kingdom. I became part of that country. Likewise, I didn't choose who was a member of my family.

I became a part of that family. And every member of my family I'm related to. And every member or every citizen of this country I'm connected with. And that's the reality of the horizontal peace that the gospel brings.

So what does that look like? If good works is the outworking of the vertical relationship being restored, that we're now created to do good works, surely what Paul is saying is that we should demonstrate in our personal relationships the unity that exists in the gospel, the unity that exists between the people of God, that we should be, as Jesus says, the peacemakers.

[27 : 28] He, of course, is the ultimate peacemaker, but we are to be reconcilers. We are to be messengers, ministers of this grace and of this goodness. So do your relationships demonstrate the unity of the gospel?

Do your relationships here within this church give a visual expression of the oneness that we have in Jesus? Do we show this world that the barriers are broken down, that the dividing wall of hostility has been removed?

So the quality of the peace that Jesus had brings, that declaration of peace that occurred those many years ago is seen in our relationships, our human relationships.

Imperfectly, we make a lot of mistakes, but you and I should treat one another as fellow citizens, members of one household. And those things that divide us on one minor level, we should find our unity in Jesus, in the cross, in his work, in his word, and in his service.

So only God ultimately can bring peace. The arrival of Jesus was heralded by a declaration of peace. The peace that was achieved was achieved on the cross at a great cost.

[28 : 52] It was his cost. It now becomes our benefit. But we are here, and we are here with a mission, and we are here with a message, and we need to speak, and we need to show that we now have a new relationship with God, that we have a new relationship with one another.

And when the gospel takes root in the lives of people, and when the gospel finds expression in the relationships of people, just watch out. In the first two centuries of the Roman Empire, persecution was rife.

Opposition was great. But men and women observed that the Christians were different, that they treated each other differently, that they treated the weak differently, that they treated the poor differently, that they treated the vulnerable differently, that the marriages among Christians were different, that the relationships within this community were different, that people who were rich and people who were poor ate together.

That was remarkable. The poor ate on their own, and the rich ate on their own, except in the Christian church. And those looking in said, there's something about this community of believers, something about these people who call themselves Christians, that is different, that is distinct, but that is attractive.

And wherever the Christian church spread, people observed how they lived. And very soon, that observation led many to come to see for themselves what it was about this Jesus, and what it was about these people of Jesus.

[30 : 25] And one of the great explanations for the gospel advancing was the quality and the character of the lives of the followers of Jesus. Maybe today, 2,000 years later, maybe we will experience persecution, maybe we will experience increased opposition, maybe the numbers of Christians in this country are few, but surely the quality of our relationships should shine.

The quality of our relationships with one another should be distinctive in a good way, and we can demonstrate in action the reality of Jesus in our hearts and in our lives.

Peace. God declares peace, God achieves peace, and God in turn calls us, blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.

Let us pray. Father, we commit ourselves to you in the name of Jesus. Amen.