

Peace that endures forever

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 13 December 2020

Preacher: Mark Chew

- [0 : 0 0] Now, as many of you will know, Zechariah lived at a time when Israel was under Roman rule. This once proud nation of Israel has been living under the oppression of foreign powers, the latest of which was the Romans, for many years.
- In fact, ever since they returned from exile. And so during these years, their faith would have been sorely tested. They would have been asking, where was God when they needed him?
- Why was he so long in coming to their rescue? Now, living in peace here in Melbourne, we maybe don't quite understand how bad it would have been for them.
- Instead, our conflicts are more local or intimate, aren't they? Within our families, at work, among our friendships. We may not call them our enemies as such, but conflicts still have a devastating effect, don't they?
- The amount of anxiety and stress that they cause, sleeplessness, loss of appetite, constant worrying. Zechariah talks about our enemies as those who hate us.
- [1 : 0 8] They're the ones who have no regard for our well-being. They disrupt our plans in life and hurt the ones that we love. And sometimes, try as we can to make peace with them, we fail.
- Now, it may be that some of these people do have evil intent in their hearts. They really want to cause us harm. But more often than not, our so-called enemies are simply people who want their own way.
- They've got a plan for their lives, and we happen to be in their way. Now, of course, so do we. We have a plan for our lives, and they happen to be in our way.
- And so, while we may call them selfish, surely they could say the same of us as well, can't they? And that's the problem, isn't it? When we live with others and have different ideas and plans, those plans and ideas invariably collide.
- Conflict follows, and peace goes. Now, Zechariah had another reason for desiring peace, and it was in verse 74. It says that it's to allow him to serve God without fear.
- [2 : 2 4] And for us as Christians, that's a reason that resonates with us, doesn't it? We're aware of the reality of persecution. We've just prayed for our brothers and sisters in Africa, China, Iran, places like that.
- And the Bible itself encourages or warns us to prepare for it. That as Christians, we're called to be ready to suffer for our faith. Now, even in the West, as our society becomes more secular, we find our voices being marginalized, aren't they?
- That we're being pushed out of the public square, that things that we hold dear, because that's what the Bible teaches, we have somehow lost the freedom to say so in public.
- But that shouldn't surprise us, because when people reject God or turn their backs on God, then the last thing they want to be told is that God has a claim over their lives, that they need to change how they live.
- And so when even we live differently to them without saying a word, that becomes threatening to them as well, because in a way we're holding up a mirror to their lives.

[3 : 37] So let's not be surprised when following Jesus, when being faithful as a church brings us into conflict, robs us of worldly peace or peace with the world.

For Zechariah, who was a priest, the very presence of the temple in Jerusalem was actually a threatening thing for their rulers, because it undermined the narrative of the Roman Empire that Caesar was God.

And so we find here in Zechariah's song that he captures perfectly the hopes of the Jewish people for a Messiah, someone to come and free them from the oppression so that they can worship God freely.

And so I've chosen the same prophecy from Isaiah last week as another reminder that actually in that same promise, God said that he would come and shatter Israel's bondage.

If we continue from verse 4 this week, it says, For as in the day of Midian's defeat, you have shattered the yoke that burdens them, the bar across their shoulder, the rod of their oppressor.

[4 : 46] Every warrior's boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood will be destined for burning, will be fuel for the fire. Here's a picture of God coming and destroying the weapons of war once and for all.

Now how will God do this? Well, we find in verse 6, by sending a king, a son, with the following characteristics. And these are famous words that we often read at Christmas.

For to us, a child is born. To us, a son is given. And the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Of the greatness of his government and peace, there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever.

And Mary's child, Jesus, is this person. He brings an end to all wars. He will bring, he will lift the burden of oppression from Israel.

[5 : 51] He will usher in an era of peace as the Prince of Peace. He is the hopeful King of Israel, the descendant of David. I wonder what picture you have in mind when such a king is described.

For me, it's a good and peaceful king. One who uses his power to maintain peace among the nations. He's above the fray of politics.

He doesn't take sides. He doesn't use his authority for his own benefit, but he uses his power to ensure that there is justice and equity among the nations.

And I have to say that if you ask people around the world, they have a yearning and a longing for something like that, don't they? I say, for example, that the United Nations was formed just for that purpose.

Even the name, United Nations, gives it away, doesn't it? For that ideal. And yet you have to say they've struggled to live up to that ideal, don't they? Because with the US, China, Russia, France, and the UK all having a vote, a veto right, a right of veto on the Security Council, then when it comes to contentious issues, often what they do is vote to protect their own interests, don't they?

[7 : 11] Rather than for the interests of the welfare of all the countries. And so, when you turn on the TV or whatever, more often than not, what you see is the disunited nations.

Well, Zechariah now continues with this song to give us the solution to world peace, as it were. It takes a surprising turn when we look to it. Because instead of merely speaking of the peace we look for, Zechariah shows us the peace we really need.

So, verse 76, he turns to his own son, now John the Baptist, and says of him, and you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High. You will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of sins.

Because of the tender mercy of God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace.

So, what's the twist here? Well, it's the fact that the knowledge of salvation, God's rescue of his people from conflict, comes through the forgiveness of sins.

[8 : 25] You see, often when we look at conflict between humans, we concentrate on the horizontal, don't we? How's God going to fix us? When actually, first and foremost, the one thing we need is to fix the vertical between us and God.

Because at the heart of every human conflict, every piece broken, is actually human pride and selfishness, which I talked about earlier. It's people wanting to do things their own way without regard for the welfare of others.

And when you do things your own way, you're not doing things God's way. even when he's created us and he knows what's best for us. And that then puts us in conflict with God.

Our relationship with him is broken. But unlike other human relationships, where usually there's, you know, each party is to be blamed to some degree, that's not the case between God and humans.

In this case, it's all one way, isn't it? We're the ones that have turned our backs on God. Which is why Zechariah says we need our sins forgiven.

[9 : 40] Now then the question becomes, how is this related with that child that was spoken of, that prince of peace? How does he fit into the bigger picture? Well, the answer is, as the one through whom people's sins are forgiven.

Zechariah's son, John the Baptist, will prepare the way for the Lord, for him, this child, this son. Zechariah calls him the Lord, that is his God.

And this knowledge of salvation is therefore none other than a knowledge of the Lord himself, of Jesus himself. And so when we come to know Jesus and when we put our faith in him because of his death for us, then our sins are forgiven and we have peace with God, the vertical reconciliation.

Now friends, if you are liking peace at the moment, then can I persuade you to not to look at the things that are horizontal at the moment.

Yes, they are important, but no, to lift up your eyes and look firstly into the face of the Prince of Peace instead because it's him that we need first and foremost so that we can find peace with God.

[10 : 54] I know that in our anxiety and worry, often we want to know what God's going to do, all the ins and outs of how he's going to solve our problem with so and so. But God says, come to me first.

Or as Zechariah says, come to him so that you might experience the tender mercy of God. And through Christ, through knowing Christ, he becomes like the rising sun shining in the darkness of your life, my life.

And when he lights up our life, what it does is guide our feet to the path of peace. It doesn't mean that all of a sudden our enemies will disappear or our conflicts will be resolved, but we get the assurance that God is with us so that even if there is still trouble, we can experience and know the peace of God.

We will know his word and he will have his spirit guide us through the challenges of life, one day at a time, one situation at a time. I don't know what you think, but I've sort of lived long enough in this world to begin to see that we can't help but have our fair share of conflict and brokenness in this world.

That attaining world peace, actually, is not realistic, even though we ideally like it. In fact, I realize that I'm the problem half the time.

[12 : 23] And while in my younger days, I sort of had the vain idolism that I could fix the world and bring about world peace or at least just peace around me, I'm beginning to realize that that actually is an elusive dream.

Why? Because the root problem, believe it or not, is not human conflict but human sin. The selfish pride that inhabits every one of our hearts. That's the problem.

That's the source of all our conflict. That's why we lack peace. I don't know about you, but even now, I find it hard not to be selfish. I wake up each morning and I think, how can I make life easier for me?

I rarely wake up and think, how am I going to make life easy for everyone else around me? I don't think like that, do I? That's the indelible stain that's still in me.

That selfishness that's hard to shake, that I keep needing to remind myself, I need to be less selfish. But amazingly, God has given us his son, hasn't he?

[13 : 29] So that even our selfish pride is forgiven. He knows us. That's why he knows we can't save ourselves. We can't solve the world's conflicts by ourselves.

But he's given us Jesus so that, first of all, we can be restored in fellowship with God. And then when we do, and we know how much we've been forgiven, then he gives us the grace to forgive others as well.

He gives us the grace to live less selfish, more and more each day. So that when even people hurt us and we suffer because of that, we're able to be at peace with them, to let it go as it were, to forgive them.

As I said, not everything will be perfect as a result. But when we live in the tender mercy of God each day and we're guided by his light through Christ, then we are guided on the path to peace.

And so, we've gone through a few gifts this Christmas, hope, joy, and tonight, peace. But tonight, we have that great gift, don't we? that at Christmas, coming to Jesus will allow us to find peace, not just this Christmas, but each and every day of our lives.

[14 : 44] Let me pray, let's pray to ask God for that abiding peace. Father, thank you that we are able to be reconciled with you through your son, Jesus.

Thank you that because of his death for us, we are no longer your enemies. Give to us the same heart to forgive others as you have forgiven us. Help us to be peacemakers just as your son, Jesus, is the Prince of Peace.

Give us peace even when our world and the people in our lives persist in conflict and strife. In the name of the Prince of Peace, in the name of Jesus, we pray.

Amen.