

God's gift of peace

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[0 : 0 0] Well, good morning. It's great to be with you again on this special weekend for you all! I have had fun this weekend just reading through some of my very favourite verses and working! through them with many of you who have come to the other talks. We've been looking at Ephesians 1 and 2, so do turn back to Ephesians 2 if you have your Bibles there in the pews and can access them.

Let's begin with a word of prayer. Our Father, we do ask that by your Spirit you will open our hearts and minds to understand and to grow to love the things of your Scripture. In Jesus' name. Amen.

I wonder how many of you, this may date me for some of you, but I wonder how many of you remember the film The Titanic or at least the love story. The young and very poor man from the bad background finding his way, you remember, onto this very grand ship and then meeting a young woman who was well above his station in life. That's the story of the film of The Titanic and how they fall in love.

And of course everything is against them. It's not just that The Titanic sinks in the film, it is that everything works against them, their class, all sorts of things they have to struggle with.

In the end, of course, it is the sea that conspires against them. The gap between the two was always going to be a bridge too far. They could never have made it really, could they? Or at the end of the film we're left wondering whether they might have made it or not. Some of you will remember the love song Celine Dion sung it.

[2 : 0 0] Every night in my dreams I see you, I feel you. This is how I know you go on, for across the distance and spaces between us, near, far, wherever you are, I believe that the heart does go on.

Once more you open the door and you're here in my heart. Love can touch us one time and last for a lifetime and never let go till we're gone.

Like so many romantic love poems and songs through the ages, it almost sounds spiritual, doesn't it? I remember when that film first came out, three of our young teenagers in our church decided to sing it in a service. They saw it as something reflecting of God's love. Whether it was or not is another question. A few people afterwards asked me, why did you let them sing that song in church this evening?

But it sounds almost spiritual. The themes of distance and closeness, of far and near, they fill many, many poems of love. But even in the midst of such a romantic vision, we know it will all come to an end. At best, it can only last a lifetime.

As the words go on, and never let go till we're gone, we know that one day they'll be gone. Well, why mention this? Because I think you'll agree that over this weekend in the first two chapters of Ephesians, we've seen that though it is in a letter form, we have an even more beautiful and special tribute to an extraordinary love in these first two chapters of Ephesians.

[4 : 01] A love that is not far away, but is near. And a love that does go on and on and does not come to an end, even when we are gone from this earth. It is the most extraordinary. Yes, it's in prose form, but it is almost a poem to this wondrous love of God. Paul spells it out in verses 4 and 5 of chapter 2.

You remember we've seen this over the weekend. Because of his great love for us, God who is rich in mercy made us alive with Christ, even when we were dead in our transgressions, it is by grace you have been saved. What love God has for us. Because his love is so deep, and his heart for his people is so committed, he takes those who were once far away, and he draws them to himself. And Paul talks of this great blessing. This is another in the great section we have here that we've been looking at over the weekend of the blessings that we have in Christ. If we know and love the Lord Jesus Christ, if we have faith in him, then we have multiple blessings in him, Paul has been saying. We become God's children. We begin to know God as our heavenly Father who loves us. We are adopted sons and daughters, Paul has said.

These blessings go on and on. They've been pouring off Paul's tongue in these opening verses. And in this great section, as it draws to a close, Paul sums it up in terms of peace with God.

So first, Paul emphasizes again that the peace we have in Christ was costly. He's talking, you remember, to converted Gentiles, the people he has described as living in darkness.

Later on in the epistle, he says just how dark their lives were. Lives that were full of magic. We know that from the book of Acts. Lives that were self-centered and centered in the goddess Diana in that city of Ephesus.

[6 : 39] And they've been converted. And what he's saying is, he's reminding them here, look, you were not part of God's covenant promises. They were not Israelites. They did not receive God's special revelation.

They were nowhere near God. Look at verses 11 and 12. Therefore, remember that formerly you were Gentiles by birth and called uncircumcised, which was a derogatory expression by those calling themselves the circumcision.

That done in the body by the hands of men. Remember that at that time you were separate from Christ. Excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of promise without hope and without God in this world.

Now, we know that from way, way back in history, it was always God's intention to reach out in love to the whole world. We know that.

You remember the great first, if you like, the first big covenant promise of the Bible is made to Abraham. That in you, Abraham, all the nations of the earth will be blessed.

[7 : 54] It wasn't in you, Abraham, a few of your descendants will be blessed. It was all the nations of the earth. That has been God's big plan all the way through. But he says to the Ephesians, you're Gentiles.

You seemed to be outside of all of that. You didn't have the prophets. You didn't have the revelation of the kings like King David and so on.

Of course, at this stage, they were generally all together without God in the world.

But this makes the love story even more remarkable. Look at verse 13. But now in Christ, you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ.

You see, unlike so many of the romantic love stories where the end is never achieved, where tragedy intervenes and so on. Here, in this most marvelous of love stories, God's end is achieved.

[9 : 00] But it comes at a cost. We have been brought near, says Paul, by the blood of Christ. Why? Well, you see, sin has always been, right since the Garden of Eden, sin has always been the cause of our separation from God.

In fact, in Romans 5 verse 10, Paul speaks starkly about what we were like without Christ. He says, when we were enemies of God, when we were still God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his son.

It's difficult to imagine that we should be considered or consider ourselves as having been enemies of God. But that's what Paul says is true of those who do not know and love the Lord.

But it's because, whether they do it intentionally or whether they do it in a deliberate, nasty way or just in a general way, they are saying, you are not for us, God. Don't want you, God.

The face is set against God. And so Paul talks of what happens in Christ. And he talks of it as peace.

[10 : 22] And the first idea of peace here in Scripture is peace with God. No longer warring against God. And that's what Paul refers to here in Ephesians.

It's first of all a peace that God gives to all who repent and turn in faith to Christ. Because in Christ, represented before God by this great King Jesus, we are forgiven.

No longer enemies. But now at peace with God. It was a costly peace. For Christ gave his life to achieve this.

He died for us so Paul can say we were brought near to God through his blood. In his sacrifice for us, he took the judgment that we deserved on himself.

Reconciling us. Bringing us together with God. No longer fighting him off with our sin and rebellion. But at one with him and forgiven.

[11 : 32] Through faith and trust in Christ. But secondly, Paul says this leads to access to the Father. Look at verses 17 and 18.

He came and preached peace to you who were far away. And peace to those who were near. That's to Gentiles and to Jews. For through him we both have access to the Father by one spirit.

Who is the both? Well, it is Jews like the Apostle Paul. And Gentiles like the Ephesians he's writing to. Both are reconciled.

Both can have peace with God. In the same way. That is through faith and trust in Jesus Christ and his death for us. All who are in Christ.

Both Jew and Gentile. Have access to the Father. This was indicated, you remember, in the most extraordinary way.

[12 : 36] The death of Jesus on the cross. In Mark's gospel we read that as Jesus died. So the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.

This was a massive great curtain. Probably about 35 feet tall. I forget how many meters that is. But a huge curtain that sort of separated off the people from God.

And the place where symbolically God dwelt in the temple. His holy presence in the Holy of Holies. Inaccessible. Even among Jews.

Only the high priest once a year. Could go into that inner place. And symbolically God is there. And God is seen to be unapproachable. And this great curtain is torn in two as Christ dies.

Now it's a symbol. It's a picture. A vivid picture. That we have access now to the Father. However, the enormous curtain is torn.

[13 : 44] And as Jesus died and the penalty was paid for sin. That sacrificial offering of the perfect Lamb of God was accepted by God.

He died for us. And the divide between God's people and their God was torn down. Access is gained to God the Father.

Look back at verse 14. For he himself, that is Jesus, is our peace. He has made the two one. And has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility.

So the peace we have in Christ was costly. But in God's incredible love for us.

In Christ, that peace brings access to the Father. This is an incredible love story. God so loved the world that he sent his only son to die for us.

[14 : 50] Through him, we have access to this loving, heavenly Father. God so loved the Father.

Again, look at verses 14 and 15. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one. And has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility.

Then verse 15. That he might create in himself one new man. One new humanity, if you like. In place of the two. So, making peace.

Now, you know, racism throughout history has surely been one of the clearest demonstrations of the sinfulness of men and women all over the world.

Hasn't it? We all have our prejudices. Almost every people at some time or other has shown racism against others.

[16 : 14] Has shown prejudice against other groupings. Has hated other groupings. Racism exists almost everywhere. Even today.

We know it so well. And the Israelite people, you see, have been called to be a light to the Gentiles. That was their calling. That was to be the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham.

You, Israel. You will have a special knowledge of me. But you will spread that. The love of God will spread. You'll be a light to the nations. But through their sin, it had failed.

And it had become more a nationalistic, inward-looking nation. And so they had come to hate those who were outside. But the reverse was also true, of course, as we know all the way through history.

Others all over the known Middle Eastern world of that day hated the Jewish people. And what Paul is saying is, look, Ephesians, you're part of the people who hated the Jewish people.

[17 : 20] Oh, by the way, I, says Paul, in effect, I'm one of the people who hated you as well. Because that's the way the world in sin is.

And he says, in Christ, that is broken down. Peace unites. God's people. The peace of Christ.

What is remarkable, then, is that Christ brings peace in this way. People who have been brought near to God by grace, through faith, find themselves a new creation.

For through Christ, God creates, there, verse 15, one new man in the place of two. Do you see why the unity of God's people is therefore one of the best witnesses there is to salvation itself?

Think about it for a moment. The family of God is one family. The family of God is one family. How beautiful, said Isaiah, are the feet of those who proclaim good news, who announce peace.

[18 : 33] It's one of the most wonderful truths of the gospel, that in Christ, people from all nations who turn to him as king are brought together in the love of Christ.

In my early years after ordination, I taught New Testament at Oak Hill College in London. And it was right in the middle of the troubles, troubles is putting it, the genocide that was going on in Rwanda between the Tutsi tribe and the Hutus.

Some of you will remember it.

One comes from the Hutu tribe and that their families have literally been fighting each other. And they come into their first lunch together with their arms around each other.

Even though their own family members have been killed on both sides by the other side. It is a remarkable thing that in Christ we have peace.

[20 : 09] Peace with each other. Peace that should be modelled between us. And do you remember, this is hugely important for us.

It is so important that in the long prayer that Jesus prays in John 17 before he goes to the cross, as he prays for you and me down the ages.

This is what he says in John 17 verse 23. He says, Heavenly Father, may they, that is the people who have believed because of what the disciples have preached.

So he's looking right down through the ages to people like you and me. He says, may they be brought to complete unity. Why? To let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

Jesus himself sees that unity of God's people as an evangelistic tool for the world. If the world looks on and sees a tutu and a hootie.

[21 : 12] I'm sorry. Anyway, whatever. If the world looks on and sees them together, they will at the very least draw a breath and say, what? What is going on here?

What? In Christ's church, racism should disappear altogether because it is a direct contradiction of the gospel.

We love our brothers and sisters wherever we are. I, as some of you know, because we talked about it earlier on in the weekend, but I travel to teach now. And in August, I will be teaching in South America and Colombia and Bolivia for a whole month.

And teaching seminary students. And one of the huge joys is to see people of other nations worshipping the Lord enthusiastically.

And when I walk into one of their churches, I know that I am a brother with these brothers and sisters. That I belong to the same family. My wife and I were in Africa in January and I was teaching in Kampala.

[22 : 23] And, oh, it's just amazing to be among a hundred Christian pastors who teach in Uganda, Ugandans. And to see their culture is different.

Their expression of their faith is different. I mean, you know, that lighthouse song that you all sang today. I mean, they would be standing in the aisles and, you know, bopping to it. Not standing there sort of saying, you know, my lighthouse.

But you know what it is. And a lot of it's cultural differences. But this staggering thing is we share the same faith and we are one in Christ. And that is what Paul is saying.

Jesus is saying is a witness to the world. To rewrite the song I started with, we might say, near, far, wherever you are, God's heart goes on reaching far.

Across the distance and spaces between us. He speaks to us this morning and he says, come to me and I will give you rest.

[23 : 28] Have we turned, all of us here, let's ask ourselves again. Have we turned to him in repentance and faith? And if not, then let me say to you, this is a good service.

This is as good a time as any. Just to quietly in your heart say, Lord Jesus, this is what I want. I want to be at peace with God. I need forgiveness. I need to become his son and daughter.

For these are the glorious promises of the gospel. And you can do that just quietly even now in your heart and ask God to be your Lord.

Ask Christ to be your king. And to help you become one of his children. But for those of us who know that we belong to Christ through faith in him.

The whole idea of peace in this passage presents us with a great challenge, doesn't it? You see, God calls us to look at ourselves as his one people reconciled to God but also to each other.

[24 : 28] And we need to ask, do we reflect in our lives the God of the universe who has no favorites whatsoever but reaches out in love in sending his son?

And do we image this? Do we model this in our lives? Are we as a church so united, so striving to work together as one people that the world that looks on will see something of the love of God?

How open our doors should be. And how hard must we strive to promote the unity of the church, which is often not easy.

For it is part of the witness to the greatest love story that this world has ever known. God loves us. God has reached out to us in Jesus Christ and through faith in him.

He has mercifully given us an incredible inheritance of blessings. And I hope that as we've looked at them this week, your hearts will have been encouraged by the Lord.

[25 : 41] Let's pray. Jesus, to you we lift our eyes. Jesus, our glory and our prize, we adore you.

Behold you, our saviour, ever true. Oh Jesus, help us to fix our eyes on you.

Amen.