

God's Declaration of Peace

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[0 : 00] Well, good evening and a warm welcome. It's great to be with you again. If you'll turn with me to Luke chapter two, this is page 857, we'll have a Christmas message at the end of July.

We'll be referring back to that passage that we read earlier from Ephesians chapter two, but what I'd like to notice here is we have a remarkable announcement given to a very unremarkable audience.

Chapter two at verse 13, Luke's gospel. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, glory to God in the highest and on earth, peace among those with whom he is pleased.

As you survey the Bible, as you read through the old in the New Testament, angelic messages were quite rare. They happened, visits and ministry of the angels occurred in the old and in the New Testament, but messages from the angelic host or visions of the angelic host, the great army of the angels, were by comparison extremely rare.

We see glimpses of the angelic armies in the Old Testament. We see the angelic hosts surrounding the throne in the book of Revelation, but to announce the arrival of Jesus, one angel was insufficient because first we have the angelic messenger speaking to the shepherds saying, fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.

[1 : 51] For unto you is born this day in the city of David a savior who is Christ the Lord. So the message of the angel was remarkable in itself, but the message of the angelic host was to underline what an auspicious and unprecedented event was to occur.

But the audience was quite unremarkable. We're told that there were shepherds that were simply doing what shepherds do. They were watching over their flocks at night and they were the audience for this great message of the angelic host, this rare appearance of the angelic army to announce the arrival of the Son, the Savior, Jesus.

And what the sum of their message was was that God was to receive the highest glory because to God alone belongs all glory, honor and praise.

But this was a message whereby peace was declared. But the context is quite remarkable and Luke captures that for us. You see, Luke was an outsider who came in to the faith.

Matthew and Mark and John were Jewish writers. They had come to know Jesus and follow Jesus whereas Luke was a Greek. He had come to know Jesus later in his life and accompanied the apostle Paul and others on journeys, missionary journeys.

[3 : 19] So as Luke introduces this great scene, in verse two he reminds us, he said, in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered.

Now the mention of Caesar Augustus is not by chance. Not only does this set us in time and in place, but this reminds us of a period of unprecedented peace.

It was known as the Roman peace, the Pax Romana. For more than 200 years it was considered impossible that you could have a period of extended peace across an empire.

And that's exactly what happened. That under Caesar Augustus and the later emperors over 213 years was a time of peace, of prosperity, of growth.

But in the midst of this peace, a different peace was proclaimed and a different emperor was announced. Because you see, the peace of Rome was not a permanent peace and it was not a genuine peace.

[4 : 30] Reflecting many years later, Napoleon near the end of his life, he had a period of enforced exile and he had a chance to think.

And he reflected upon the emperors and upon the empires of the world and he said this. He said Alexander and Caesar, Charlemagne and myself established great empires.

But upon what? Upon force. Jesus Christ established an empire, but he established his empire on love. And to this day, millions will die for him.

And from that Napoleon reason this, he said I know men and Jesus Christ is no mere man. There is something remarkable about this Jesus that sets him apart from any other world leader, any other emperor, any other leader.

And the peace that is announced is unlike any other peace. You see the peace, the Roman peace was established by force. It was much easier to go along with Rome than to oppose Rome.

[5 : 39] And for this period of time, there was a relative peace and a relative calm throughout the Western empire. But the peace that Jesus brings is a remarkable peace.

It's a piece that begins in the heart. It's a piece that transforms the life. And it's a piece that ultimately will be experienced not in one place or at one time, but in all places and for all time. Now it's been said that we as people, we have the capacity to declare war, but only God has the capacity to declare peace. Because to declare peace must be accompanied by the power to achieve that declaration.

And only God can achieve that kind of peace. In the Bible, in the New Testament, when the message of Jesus is proclaimed, there's not one single word that can capture what Jesus has come to do.

There's not one word that can capture what Jesus has achieved or accomplished. But the biblical authors use several different words. They use words that are characteristic of the legal courts, words like justification.

[6 : 53] Because on the cross, Jesus died so that we, the unrighteous, can be declared righteous. The good, the righteous Jesus died so that the unrighteous can be made righteous.

That's the language of the courtroom. There's also the language of the marketplace, language like ransom or redemption that speak of a price being paid. And the price being paid to cause a release to be achieved.

The idea here is like a prisoner of war or a slave. They're captured, they're at the mercy of another. And some benefactor comes and pays a price and sets the captive free, sets the slave free.

So there's the marketplace language. There's relationship language like reconciliation. Because in and of ourselves, we are not at peace with God or peace with one another.

Relationships have been broken down. And God through the gospel, Jesus through the cross, brings reconciliation. He reconciles us to himself.

[7 : 57] And he reconciles us to one another. So there's relationship language. But there's also language of the battlefield. There's language of victory and language of peace.

And with you this evening, I'd like to explore the peace that is declared and the peace that is achieved by Jesus. Because if you are a Christian tonight, you are now at peace.

You are at peace with God. You enjoy the peace of God. And there is a peace that should categorize or characterize your relationships with God and your relationships with one another.

Because the peace that God brings is unique. Because the peace that God provides and the peace that is achieved by Jesus is a permanent, is a lasting and is a all-encompassing peace.

Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased. The peace of Rome disappeared. Human efforts at peace can achieve certain results.

[9 : 07] But again, those results are temporary. In the 1920s, there was an initiative among the Western democracies. After that cataclysm called the Great War or the War to End All Wars, the Western democracies felt that if we can outlaw war, we can achieve peace.

And many of the Western democracies signed up. It was to this new act to outlaw war. I'll give you a hint, it didn't work. 1939 comes along.

And the old ways in which we referred to the Great War or the War to End All Wars, we don't call that conflict the 1418 war or that anymore, we call that World War I.

Why? Because the 3945 war followed, which is called World War II. The war to end all wars did not end all wars. The act to abolish war was not successful.

And if you want depressing reading, you can look on the internet again, that great source of knowledge. And there are at least 25 active conflicts today on earth.

[10 : 19] Israel, Palestine is one democratic Republic of Congo. There's another. That's a country that's been rife with civil war for decades.

But some of these conflicts are lesser known. Destabilization in Mali, border conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. And you look and you survey the world as we live in it and you say there is an absence of peace.

People just can't seem to get along. Israel and Palestine, India and Pakistan, long standing, not just years, not just decades, but centuries and millennia.

There is a profound absence of peace on the world stage and there's a profound absence of peace in the human heart. There is not satisfaction, there is not completion.

Because in the Bible, the language of peace is not simply an absence of war. But the language of peace is a language of completeness, a language of wholeness, a language of harmony.

[11 : 22] And what you have often here, as I've seen, you'll have when the singing is led, oftentimes the singing will be led in all the four parts.

You'll have four part harmony. And when you hear the voices blend together, you have such a rich and such a full sound. But if you had four people leading the singing and each sang a different tune and a different pitch at a different pace, it would be a cacophonous mess.

And that's what we are like. There is no harmony in the human heart or the human soul. There is no harmony among the human society or human culture because we are incapable of producing such peace.

If you go back to the very beginning of the Bible, look at those first two chapters, there is peace and harmony. We are at peace with God our maker. We are at peace with one another, Adam and Eve. We are at peace with our surroundings, our environment, and there's even a sense of internal harmony and completeness with those first members of the human race. Genesis chapter three comes along and that fourfold harmony is shattered, is destroyed.

[12 : 35] No longer peace with God. No longer at peace with one another. No longer at peace or in harmony with the environment and no longer at peace within ourselves. There's a fracture that has taken place and the cause of that fracture is sin.

And that sin has a profound impact upon every heart and every life. And the impact is twofold. There's a vertical impact that separates us from our God and there's a horizontal impact that separates us from one another. So when the gospel declares peace on earth, what God means by that is that the vertical and the horizontal peace has been achieved not by ourself, not by human effort, not by legislation, not by force of arms, but only God himself can bring this kind of wholeness, this kind of harmony and this kind of peace.

We could look at many different texts, we could look at Romans chapter five, but this evening I'd like to look at Ephesians chapter two because this is one of those places in the Bible where the apostle Paul brings before our attention such profound truths of the gospel and its impact.

So if you look at Ephesians chapter two and it's page 976 in the pew Bibles, if you have one of the black covered Bibles, we see the vertical work of the gospel in verses one to 10.

[14 : 13] What does God do for us? What has God done for us? And what is God doing within us? In verse one of chapter two, we're simply told there's a problem and that's a profound problem called death and you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked.

And the apostle Paul then begins to describe the threefold enemies that we confront. There's the world, the world that was created by God, but the world that doesn't know God, the world that is working in its own way to its own end by its own standard.

We have the world, we have the evil one, the prince of the air, the devil, the one who slanders, the one who lies and the one who conspires against God and against all that's good.

And if that wasn't enough, if the world and the devil weren't enough, we have the flesh, our own desires that are at odds with God, our own desires that contradict God in His word and contradict God in His character.

So there's dead humanity and there are powerful enemies and God in His grace and in His power has made us alive, verse four, but God being rich in mercy because of the great love with which He loved us even when we were dead in our trespasses has made us alive together with Christ by grace you have been saved.

[15 : 48] The impossible made possible. The declaration of peace, the reconciliation, the salvation that has been brought by God to lost mankind.

That great epic poem in the 17th century, John Milton's Paradise Lost. We lost, only God can regain. We lost and only God can restore.

Spiritually dead people are incapable of doing anything good. We are dead in sins and dead in trespasses. We cannot live, we cannot do, we cannot achieve, but God being rich in mercy. So we see this vertical aspect of our relationship with God. He takes the initiative, He achieves the result, He deserves all the glory and we are the beneficiary of His grace, of His love and of His mercy.

The dead are made alive. But the declaration of peace does not end with the absence of hostility to God, the absence of enmity towards God, the now being made alive in Christ.

[17:02] We are now given a new life, we are now given a new desire and we are now given new work to do as we mentioned earlier today looking at Titus. In verse 10 we're told that the dead are now alive and that they are now equipped.

For we are His workmanship created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.

Now we could easily end the discussion of peace or the discussion of the gospel or the discussion of Jesus at verse 10. The dead made alive, the lost found, the lost saved.

The those under the power of the world, the flesh and the devil released and restored and renewed. But the apostle Paul does not stop there. And this reminds us that we have a profound responsibility as those who have been recipients of God's grace, those who have been made alive, those who have experienced this new relationship with God because that relationship can never stop simply with that relationship.

We cannot simply say I am now at peace with God. I now enjoy the peace of God. I now am alive, I once was dead. I now was blind. I now can see the language of amazing grace.

[18:24] But the apostle Paul goes on to say that the peace that has been declared is a profound peace that impacts our lives horizontally, our relationships.

In verse 11, therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh called the uncircumcision by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands.

Remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.

Dead in trespasses, dead in sins, hopeless, helpless, separated, alienated, strangers. This picture of darkness, this picture of isolation, this picture of separation is profound.

This is what we are apart from Christ. But then we're told that God has done something profound to bring us together as people.

[19:31] Verse 13, but now. You see in verse four, but God being rich in mercy, made us alive, but now verse 13, in Christ Jesus, you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

We are brought near to God, yes, but we are brought near to one another. So the dividing barriers that exist between people, the cultural barriers, the religious barriers that would otherwise keep us apart have now been destroyed, have now been nullified, how can this happen?

How can God take Jews and Gentiles? How can He bring them together as one people? How can He tear down the barriers that separate people today?

Barriers of culture, barriers of language, barriers of class, barriers of education, barriers of opportunity, because every place you see, you see separation.

Those who are rich and those who are poor, those who are educated, those who are illiterate, those who have access to resource and those who don't. And you think these separations are profound and they are insoluble, just as our efforts to abolish war are unsuccessful, our efforts to abolish separations between people have been unsuccessful.

[20:59] I've heard estimates as to what, in the 1960s, President Johnson, Lyndon Johnson, announced the Great Society, that the United States would spend an unbelievable amount of money to do exactly what is described here, that the barriers that existed in society would be eliminated.

Everyone would have access to education. Everyone would have access to electricity. Everyone would have access to healthcare. It was estimated that the Great Society has cost \$2 trillion, at least.

Now, that's just a lot of money. \$2 trillion of anything is a lot. \$2 trillion is a lot of money. And we've have to, it's been, even the most optimistic advocates of the social experiment had to conclude that the Great Society has failed.

The barriers still exist between the rich and the poor. The barriers still exist between the races. The barriers still exist in terms of education and opportunity and access and resource.

So human capacity is insufficient to bring peace. We cannot bring peace with God. We cannot bring peace with one another. We cannot destroy the barriers that separate people, no matter how hard you try, or no matter how much you spend.

[22 : 23] But God himself in Jesus Christ, remember that declaration of peace, he himself can bring peace where there previously was enmity.

But now in Christ Jesus, you who once were far off, the alien, the stranger, the isolated, the separated, the cut off, you have been brought near by the blood of Jesus.

So here's a different type of language together as well. Here's the language of the sacrifice of the temple. Here's the language of death, but here's the language of death that brings life.

And that's so often the apparent contradictions of the gospel. The apparent contradictions of the gospel in that you have a righteous God who is able to work in the lives of unrighteous people.

That seems incongruous. You have the life of God in Jesus Christ and the death of Jesus Christ is able to bring life to others. It doesn't seem to make sense and yet it does.

[23 : 27] The death of Jesus brings life. The sacrifice of Jesus brings peace, for he himself is our peace.

He who enjoyed perfect peace with the Father came down to a place of strife, came down to a place of conflict to give his life so that we could be the beneficiary of this peace that was announced by the angelic host.

He himself is our peace who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility.

The dividing wall that separates people from people. The dividing wall that separates Jew and Gentile. That separates all other races or classes or economic levels of society.

Those dividing lines have now been destroyed because of the work of the gospel, because of the work of Jesus Christ, not because of our effort, not because of our work.

[24 : 31] So if you're today here as a Christian, you now are at peace with God and you now are at peace with one another. Anything that would separate us on a human level is now been destroyed, is now been taken away because we share this profound relationship with God.

We're part of the same family. We're members of the same family. God is our father, Jesus is our elder brother and every other believer is part of that wider family.

We are part of one people, not many people. We have different denominations and different divisions within the Christian church that sadly undermine this reality.

But every believer in Jesus Christ is at one with every other believer. That is how God sees it and that is how we should see it and we should make that peace visible.

Just like the peace that we enjoy with God, that vertical relationship that should be visible in our lives, how we live, how we respond to God, we praise Him, we honor Him, we glorify Him.

[25 : 37] But when the barrier has been broken and taken down, when the divisions have been removed between people, we as a church, we as the people of God should be a living illustration of this great reality.

You're soon to be assistant minister, Thomas Davis, among many other things as a great reader and he encouraged me to read a book which is entitled The Lost Letters of Pergamon.

They were written by a New Testament scholar, they weren't biblical letters, but they were written in the style of first century letters. And these letters captured a fictional but yet biblically accurate conversation which included among others the historian Luke, the biblical writer Luke and various characters in the ancient Near East.

And what these letters captured in that Lost Letters of Pergamon is the way in which the cultural barriers within Roman society were strangely broken down by the gospel, that free men, citizens and slaves would sit together, eat together, worship together, speak together, they would call each other by their first names.

This was unheard of. Roman culture was stratified, the rich and the poor, the free and the slave, the privileged and the despised.

[27 : 06] And these were classes that just never mixed. But all of a sudden, these were people that were sitting side by side, singing the praises of God, sitting side by side, passing the wine and the bread and sharing and fellowship.

And in the Roman world, this was just unheard of. How is it that this group of people sit down together? And there's Jews in the group and there's Gentiles in the group and there's Romans in the group and there's Greeks in the group.

And they seem to have a fellowship and a friendship that's not based upon what they can do for one another. They seem to have a relationship which is unheard of in the ancient world.

And even those who were great critics of the Christian faith had to conclude that one reason that the Christian faith spread so quickly in the Roman empire was this, was the quality of the lives of the Christian believers.

They spoke of love, but they actually did love. They spoke of grace and they acted towards one another in a gracious way. The fruit of the spirit loved joy, peace, patient kindness, goodness.

[28 : 14] They demonstrated the fruit of the spirit in their lives, in their character, in their action. They looked after the weak. They cared for the poor. They gave to those in need.

They shared with what they had with others. And this had a profound impact those 2,000 years ago. It was an age of cynicism, an age of skepticism, an age of unbelief 2,000 years ago.

All of a sudden, lives were transformed. All of a sudden, communities were transformed. People saw the gospel in practice and they couldn't explain it apart from something to do with this Jesus that they constantly speak about.

This Jesus that they appear to worship. This Jesus that they appear to give credit to. It all comes down to Jesus. And the visual expression of our faith, the way we react and interact with God, but the way we interact with each other can do one of two things.

It can put people off. These are a people that speak of peace. These are a people that speak of love. They're not very peaceful. They're not very loving. They speak of kindness, but they don't seem to show kindness.

[29 : 28] The world does not need hypocrisy, saying and doing different things. But when the world sees something different, something distinct, something attractive, something genuine, they are attracted to that.

And they come to know for themselves this gospel. In verse 15, we're told that the dividing wall of hostility having been abolished, broken down.

By abolishing verse 15, the law of commandments expressed in ordinances that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace.

And might reconcile us both to God in one body, through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and preached peace to those who were near. He takes the initiative. He proclaims the gospel. He proclaims peace. He achieves peace. He destroys hostility. He breaks down the barriers. So this is a people who have known Jesus.

[30 : 36] This is a people who worship Jesus. And this is a people who have experienced the grace of Jesus and express the grace of Jesus in their relationships with one another. 2000 years have elapsed.

We live today in an age of skepticism. An age of unbelief, an age of cynicism. There are many who do not share our faith. Many who do not share our beliefs.

But I guarantee you this, they're looking. They're listening. They're observing. And what do they see? In Ephesus, they saw a people who loved Jesus and a people who loved one another.

And that was a powerful and a persuasive apologetic. We often think of apologetics. If you read the works of C.S. Lewis or Francis Schaefer or Tim Keller, and some, there are some very gifted apologists who can defend and who can explain the faith and who can counter arguments and who could give a good defense of what it is that we believe and why it is that we believe it.

But in large, those are the exceptions. They are particularly gifted people, particularly articulate people. But I'll suggest this, that if you're a Christian here today, you too are an apologist, a defender, a proclaimer.

[31 : 59] You are defending and proclaiming the gospel and the quality and the character of your life and the quality and the character of your relationships. Never perfect.

You'll get it wrong. We get it wrong. You'll get it wrong at home. You'll get it wrong at work. You'll get it wrong in church. But nonetheless, there's a recognition that the work of Jesus has profoundly changed every relationship, our relationship with God, our relationship with each other, our relationship with our family, our relationship with our community.

And the declaration of peace brings a harmony, brings a wholeness, brings a completeness that no one else and nothing else can bring.

Human effort has attempted much and achieved little. Divine effort has achieved everything. When God declares, He also enables.

When He declares peace, He enables peace to happen. When He declares that hostilities have ceased, when He declares that walls have been broken down, that barriers have been removed, He accompanies His declaration with power and with authority.

[33 : 15] There are many people today that we are in contact with. They might not be here tonight. They might not be willing or able to come to church now, but they are listening.

They're listening to the words that you speak. They're looking. They're looking at the lives that you live. And they're looking at how we interact with one another. And the unity that we can demonstrate can be a persuasive and powerful apologetic that Jesus really is who He says He is.

It's not so much that we are who we say we are, but the quality of our lives can testify that He is who He says He is. We can give credibility to His message and credibility to His claims by the quality of our relationships.

We love one another. We care for one another. We demonstrate that love in word. We demonstrate that love in action. And a people observing us should be able to say, see how they love one another.

The gospel was proclaimed in a time of peace, but the peace that was announced was a peace that passes all understanding. Transcend's time, Transcend's culture is for now and for all eternity.

[34 : 31] And that peace is found nowhere else but in Jesus Christ. A reconciliation that takes the dead and makes them alive. That takes the lost and makes them found.

And it's a profound and transformative peace that destroys the barriers that separate people and unites us together as one.

That's His gospel. That's His proclamation. And He accompanies His proclamation with the power to achieve it. So He is worthy of all glory in the highest because He has announced peace on earth and goodwill to men.

May God bless His word to us. Let us pray. Father, we so often fall short of your standard. We so often fall short of our own standards. We so often miss the mark.

Lord, remind us that we are called to love you and to love one another. That we have a profound relationship with you through your son, Jesus. And that relationship with you through Jesus gives us a profound and powerful relationship with one another.

[35 : 38] There are many things that separate us. Culture, language, background, education, economics. And yet in Christ we have a unity that transcends all of these barriers and destroys all of these barriers.

And I pray that we would be able to demonstrate the peace that we enjoy with you by demonstrating a peace that we enjoy with one another. That instead of discord, there would be harmony.

Instead of division, there would be unity. And instead of dissent, that there would be a harmonious love that characterizes the people of God.

That characterizes this, the church of God. And that may be heard and seen by a world that does not know. A world that has not heard in a world that does not believe.

That they too might come to know for themselves the Jesus. Who shed His blood that we could live. Who died to give life and to give life in all of its fullness.

[36 : 39] So Lord hear us and help us, enable us to put into practice that which we know. To put into practice that which we believe. And to demonstrate the reality of the gospel in the integrity of our own individual relationships.

These are things that we cannot do. But we trust that you can do these things in us. And that you can do these things through us. So give us love and give us hope and give us joy in every increasing measure.

We pray in Jesus' name, amen.