

Finding Peace in our Struggles

Luke 2:14

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Christmas is a big deal in Finland. For over 700 years, at noon on Christmas Eve, a Declaration of Christmas Peace is proclaimed in the city of Turku. Read by a city official from the balcony of a historic mansion at the center of town, this Declaration of Christmas Peace reminds people to spend the holiday in harmony. It ends by threatening offenders with harsh punishments, before wishing everyone a Merry Christmas.

“Tomorrow, God willing, is the graceful celebration of the birth of our Lord and Savior; and thus is declared a peaceful Christmas time to all, by advising devotion and to behave otherwise quietly and peacefully, because he who breaks this peace and violates the peace of Christmas by any illegal or improper behavior shall under aggravating circumstances be guilty and punished according to what the law and statutes prescribe for each and every offence separately. Finally, a joyous Christmas feast is wished to all inhabitants of the city.”

This declaration, with its dire warnings about breaking peace, is based on legislation created in the 13th Century to extend the tradition of the *“Truce of God.”* I wonder if we should start a tradition like that in our country where every person who breaks peace would be punished?

There’s not much peace pervading our culture right now, is there?

- In a new Harris Poll called, *“Stress in America,”* 8 in 10 adults say the coronavirus pandemic is a significant source of stress in their lives, while 60% say the number of issues America faces is overwhelming to them.
- Another survey finds 65% of Americans have had their own personal crisis at some point during 2020.

My guess is legislation that punishes a lack of peace would put us all in prison! If we ever needed a proclamation of peace, it’s right now. Listen to this declaration first given over 2,000 years ago, celebrating the *“true truce of God”* that leads to peace among people.

And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. ¹⁰ And the angel said to them, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. ¹¹ For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. ¹² And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.” ¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,

¹⁴ “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom He is pleased!”

¹⁵ When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.” ¹⁶ And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. ¹⁷ And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. ¹⁸ And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. ²⁰ And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

There is so much to unpack in this passage but instead of doing that, we’re going to primarily spend our time in verse 14. The first message the shepherds receive is from one angel, when suddenly a whole regiment of rejoicing warrior angels fills the sky, praising God in a thunderous chorus: **“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom He is pleased!”** In the coming of Jesus, God extends grace to those out of place.

I see two outcomes of this announcement from the angels.

1. **Glory to God** – glory goes up to God
2. **Peace to people** – peace comes down from God

We could say it like this: *Peace comes to those who praise Him, and He gives grace to those who give Him glory.*

John Piper offers this insight, *“First and foremost, God is glorified because this child is born. And second, peace is to spread everywhere this child is*

received...God's glory [is] sung out among men for the sake of His name. God's peace [is] lived out among men for the sake of His name."

Let's look at each aspect of this announcement.

1. Glory to God. In the first stanza the multitude of the heavenly host praise God and say, ***"Glory to God in the highest."*** The original meaning of glory is the idea of weightiness. God's glory is the sum total of the weightiness of all His attributes. It includes splendor, brightness, shining, radiance, brilliance, status, praise, honor, wonder and supernatural power. It has to do with the fame of God's glorious name.

But there's more. Notice all of this is in the superlative – ***"in the highest."*** This refers to the *"loftiest and most elevated."* God is at the highest level, the peak, the summit. He is the most beautiful, the brightest and most brilliant. There is no one higher and there is nothing greater. Among the Jews, the "highest" is *Elyon*, the main name for God. The angels are publicly acknowledging the weight of God's glory in an act of worship, and the shepherds get the joy of joining them in praise.

It had been a long time since God's glory dwelt on earth. Think back to the ***"tabernacle."*** This was a portable worship center where God dwelt and met with his people. It was also the place where sacrifices were made and where God's glory and holiness were displayed.

In Exodus 40, after the tabernacle was completed, God's glory filled it to overflowing: ***"Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. And Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled on it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle."*** (Exodus 40:34-35)

The Jewish rabbis coined the expression *shekinah glory*, a form of a Hebrew word that literally means *"he caused to dwell."* For many years, people met with God and knew of His glory through the Tabernacle.

Later on, God instructed King Solomon to build a permanent worship center called the Temple. In 1 Kings 6:13, after finishing the construction, God says this: ***"And I will dwell among the children of Israel and will not forsake my people Israel."***

We read in 1 Kings 8:10-11 that ***"a cloud filled the house of the Lord, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud, for the glory of the Lord"***

filled the house of the Lord.” Moses was not able to enter the Tabernacle because God’s glory was filling it and now the priests couldn’t get in the Temple either.

The glory of God fills the Temple for about 350 years. But then, because of people’s persistent sin and rebellion, God raised up the Babylonians, who wiped out Jerusalem and destroyed the Temple. God’s glory then departs slowly and reluctantly.

First, the glory leaves the Holy of Holies and then it hovers over the threshold of the door at the east gate and then in Ezekiel 11:23 we read these sad words: **“And the glory of the LORD went up from the midst of the city and stood on the mountain that is on the east side of the city.”** As a result, God is no longer dwelling with His people and the display of His glory on earth becomes a distant memory.

Isaiah 64:1 captures the plaintive plea of the people as they lament that the glory of God on earth is gone. This cry lasts for centuries: **“Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down!”** One of our Christmas carols captures this sense of longing and expectation, *“O come, O come, Emmanuel and ransom captive Israel...”*

The heavens are silent for four centuries until Harold the Angel (I mean, the herald angel) starts harking in Luke 2:9: **“And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the [wait for it...] glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear.”**

Then the angel announces not “fake news,” but factual news, as he gives the message about what happened in the manger: **“And the angel said to them, ‘Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news [“to publish glad tidings”] of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.’”** The highest degree of glory to God is connected with the giving of His Son.

And then unexpectedly, a whole arsenal of adoring angels breaks through the heavens and proclaim that God’s glory has now returned in the birth of a baby: **“[wait for it...] GLORY TO GOD in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom He is pleased.”**

It's as if one angel announcing the news was no longer enough. The sky is suddenly filled with myriads upon myriads of messengers, a great company of warriors, worshipping with the widest and deepest and highest praise possible. They couldn't help but praise because Savior-Christ-Lord had been born. 1 Timothy 3:16 contains a lyric to an ancient hymn that summarizes the adoration of the angels: ***“Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness: He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory.”***

1 Peter 1:12 tells us ***“...angels long to look into these things.”*** It's as if they are on their tiptoes “peering into” redemption. These angels were waiting a long time for the birth of the baby and now they explode with adoration. This doxology was God-centered and glory-focused. Can you imagine how loud this must have been? They're simply obeying Isaiah 44:23: ***“Sing, O heavens, for the Lord HAS DONE IT, shout O depths of the earth.”*** Because the Lord has done it, they can't help but break forth into doxology.

I'm reminded of the words from “Silent Night.”

*Silent night holy night
Shepherds quake at the sight
Glories stream from heaven afar
Heavenly hosts sing alleluia*

Listen to John 1:14: ***“And the word became flesh and dwelt among us and we have seen His GLORY, GLORY as of the only Son from the Father...”***

Check this out. *In a similar way that God dwelt with His people in the Tabernacle and in the Temple, He now dwells with people through His only Son Jesus Christ!* In Him, the glory of God has descended, and He has pitched His tent to dwell with us. God's good news comes into our bad news. Centuries of waiting are now over.

Don't miss this! God's glory was previously tied to a place but now it's wrapped up in a person. And, when we put our faith in Him, His glory comes and resides within us.

Peace comes to those who praise Him, and He gives grace to those who give Him glory.

The first part of the story is all about God’s glory. The second part is all about the peace He extends to those with whom He is pleased.

2. Peace to People. The adoration of the angels led them to declare a proclamation of peace in the second stanza of verse 14: “...*and on earth peace among those with whom He is pleased.*”

It’s possible these worshipping warriors divided into an antiphonal choir. I wonder if half of them chanted, “*Glory to God in the highest...*” and the other half responded with, “...*and on earth peace among those with whom He is pleased?*”

One Greek scholar renders it like this: “*Peace among men who are recipients of God’s good pleasure.*” Bruce Larson adds: “*If you are able to receive what God wants to give, the message of peace is for you.*” It all starts in heaven with God’s perfect plan and it arrives on earth where peace comes to those who personalize the message. It’s available to all but activated only for those who accept Immanuel, for those who believe, repent, and receive (see John 1:12).

Notice that peace comes only *after* praising. We must put God and His glory first and then peace will come. We must keep together what the angels kept together – *Glory to God* and *peace to people*. A heart bent on showing and sharing the glory of God will know the peace of God.

While this is a sentimental time of the year, there is nothing special about this season if one does not know the Christ of Christmas. The phrase “Happy Holidays” is meaningless without an acknowledgement of the holiness of God. The precondition for peace is to first praise God for His glory and grace.

The word “peace” appears over 400 times in Scripture. In the Old Testament, “peace” is the word *shalom*, and is a state of wholeness, restoration, reconciliation and harmony that is intended to resonate in all relationships. When used as a greeting, *shalom* was a wish for outward freedom from disturbance as well as an inward sense of well-being. To a people constantly harassed by enemies, peace was the premiere blessing.

In Numbers 6:24-26, God gave Moses these words to use when blessing His people: “*The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make His face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up His countenance upon you and give you **peace**.*” This is also captured in Psalms 20:11: “*May the Lord bless His people with **peace!***”

The word “peace” in the New Testament means to “*join together; to set at one again.*” It has the idea of gluing something back together and is used in at least four ways.

- Peace *with God* – that’s the *vertical* dimension
- Peace *of God* – this takes place *internally*
- Peace *with others* – that’s peace *horizontally*
- Peace *for others* – that’s the *proclamation* of peace in the gospel

Peace with God

Before we can be at peace with God, we must come to grips with how ruptured our relationship with God is apart from Christ. While God loves us and cherishes us, He is filled with indignation because of our incessant sinfulness. Romans 1:18: ***“The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness.”***

Romans 3:17-18 adds, ***“And the way of peace they have not known. There is no fear of God before their eyes.”*** As a result, Ephesians 2:3 declares we ***“were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.”***

In his classic book called, “Peace with God,” written over 50 years ago, Billy Graham hits it on the head: *“The greatest warfare going on in the world today is between mankind and God. People may not realize that they are at war with God, but if they don’t know Jesus Christ as their Savior...God considers them to be at war with Him.”*

Romans 5:1 gives the good news: ***“Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”*** Because of what Jesus Christ did on the Cross, you and I can now be at peace with God. God the Father poured out His wrath, fury, and indignation on His Son, who died in our place, as our sin-substitute. Immanuel is our intermediary.

Ephesians 2:14 declares, ***“For He himself is our peace.”*** Colossians 1:20 says that Jesus reconciled Himself to all things ***“making peace through His blood, shed on the cross.”***

Peace only sounds wonderful when we recognize that we’ve been at war. It’s a radical thought that God’s anger is satisfied because of the sacrifice of His Son.

God's fury is fully absorbed by the death of Jesus. Propitiation brings peace. Once we are justified by faith, peace is a primary reality for the believer. The word "**with**" God points to a person's relationship with God. There's a face-to-face aspect that indicates a relational reconciliation has taken place. Isolation has been replaced with intimacy. We can face a holy God because we're now glued to Him by the finished and final work of Christ on the cross.

It's easy during this time of the year to focus just on the birth of Jesus. But let's never forget that Jesus was born in order to die. Our culture seems OK with celebrating Christmas but doesn't care much for the cross.

This came to the forefront earlier this month when a Homeowner's Association in Raleigh, North Carolina ordered a \$100 fine to a couple for displaying a cross in their yard. The HOA claimed since the cross has no connection to Christmas, they had to take it down. In further discussions with the homeowners they asked them to provide biblical references connecting Christmas and the cross. The couple gladly provided references. In the meantime, the cross remains standing.

Listen carefully. The cross has everything to do with Christmas! Instead of going to prison for breaking peace, because Jesus took our punishment, we have been set free. He provided a way for us to be set at one again with the God of the universe. God's joy and His justice converge on the cross of Calvary. His love and His law find full satisfaction through the sacrificial death of His Son. God is both just and the justifier.

Friend, do you have peace *with* God today? Or are you far away from Him? No matter how far away you are, allow the truth of Isaiah 57:19 to wash over you: "**Peace, peace, to those far and near,**' says the Lord. '**And I will heal them.**'"

Peace of God

In order to have the peace *of* God internally, we must first experience peace *with* God vertically. The upward dimension must be taken care of *before* inward peace can permeate our lives. Only those at peace *with* God can experience the peace *of* God. Shortly before Jesus died, He declared in John 14:27: "**Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.**" This inner peace is a gift from Jesus and is a key element of the fruit of the Spirit.

We will experience this peace in proportion to the room we give the Holy Spirit in our lives. I talked to someone a while ago who told me how God had given her peace about a very difficult decision. She described the peace she experienced as surprising. I reminded her that this is the “**peace that surpasses all understanding**” from Philippians 4:7. Luke 1:79 says Jesus will: “...**guide our feet into the path of peace.**”

Are you familiar with the carol, “*I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day?*” It’s based on a poem written by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Two years before writing it, Longfellow’s personal peace was pulverized when his wife was tragically burned in a fire. Then, during the Civil War, his oldest son joined the army without his father’s blessing and ended up severely wounded.

He writes about hearing Christmas bells that speak of peace but he doesn’t have any peace in his heart – “*And in despair I bowed my head: ‘There is no peace on earth,’ I said, ‘For hate is strong and mocks the song of peace on earth, good will to men.’*”

As the bells ring louder, the words of Christmas peace go deeper into his soul until finally he declares, “*God is not dead, nor does He sleep...the wrong shall fail, the right prevail...with peace on earth, good will to men.*”

I like how he personalizes the song of the angels with these lyrics...

*Do you hear the bells they’re ringing? (peace on earth)
The life the angels singing (peace on earth)
Open up your heart and hear them (peace on earth)
Peace on earth, good will to men*

Can you hear the angels singing? They’re giving glory to God and they’re proclaiming peace to people. Will you open your heart so you can hear them?

Peace with Others

When we’re at peace *with* God, and we have *internal* peace, we can then be at peace *with others*. Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said: “*The followers of Jesus have been called to peace. When He called them, they found their peace, for He is their peace. But now they are told that they must not only have peace but make it.*”

Jesus said in Matthew 5:9: ***“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the sons of God.”*** I find it interesting that Jesus didn’t call us to be “peacekeepers,” but instead “peacemakers.” This could be translated as “peace workers.” It takes effort to bring conflict to an end. When we work at resolving conflict, we are doing what God does. We’re called to make peace when we’re involved in conflict. Romans 14:19 lays out our responsibility: ***“Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification.”***

Within a country filled with chaos and conflict, *are you planting peace in others or are you sowing seeds of strife?* Determine right now to be a planter of peace not a sower of strife. Is there anyone you need to make things right with? Anyone you need to “be at one with”? Do you need to forgive or ask for forgiveness? Some of you are dreading Christmas because you’re in conflict with someone in your family. Maybe a root of bitterness has gone down deep in your life. It’s time to let it go.

Peace for Others

The only way for people to have peace with God, to have peace inside, and to be at peace with others, is for people like us to tell them about the gospel of peace. Peter summarizes the essence of the Incarnation when he declares in Acts 10:36: ***“You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, telling the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all.”*** Just as the shepherds hurried off to tell the good news, so too we must share peace with others.

Are you out of sorts with God? Repent and receive the Prince of Peace into your life and be made right with Him immediately. Are you all shaken up on the inside? Give all your anxiety to the Almighty and His unexplained peace will give you calm in the midst of chaos. Are your relationships ruptured? Do the hard work of being a peacemaker. And then go and spread this message of peace.

Peace comes to those who praise Him, and He gives grace to those who give Him glory.

- **Give glory to God** – that’s the first thing
- **Receive peace to people** – that’s the second thing.

We must keep the order straight.

Hope has a name...it's Jesus!
Love has a name...it's Jesus!
Joy has a name...it's Jesus!
Peace has a name...it's Jesus!

Let's go back and ponder the message given to the shepherds in Luke 2:11: "***For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.***"

1. Personal – "***unto you***"
2. Present – "***this day***"
3. Place – "***city of David***"
4. Person – "***Savior who is Christ the Lord.***"

Luke 2:16 says the shepherds "***went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger.***" The shepherds ran to find the Prince of Peace. Will you run, will you repent, and will you receive the Savior who is "***born to you?***" He was born to raise the sons of earth, born to give us second birth.

Romans 15:13 says, "***May the God of hope fill you with joy and peace in believing.***" You must believe in order to receive redemption and reconciliation. To "believe" means, "*to cling to, rely on, and lean into.*"

Will you come to Christ right now? He has delivered a "declaration of peace" and is waiting for you to decide to accept the "true truce of God." That's His invitation to you.

One of the more familiar Christmas carols is, "*O Come all Ye Faithful.*" I came across another take on this that I like better because most of us are not faithful. We don't measure up. We are sinful and selfish, weak and unstable...but we can still come.

After I lead us in prayer, we're going to watch and listen as Kodi Kargl sings, "*O Come all You Unfaithful.*"

Here are some of the words...

*O come bitter and broken
Come with fears unspoken
O come guilty and hiding ones
There is no need to run*

*See what your God has done
He's the Lamb who was slain for our pardon
His **promise is peace** for those who believe.*

If you're ready to believe and receive the Savior, who is Christ the Lord, right now, please pray this prayer.

O God, I have not been giving you the glory you deserve. I confess my sinfulness and repent of how I've been living. I turn now to you and believe that your Son Jesus was born in order to die for me. I am in desperate need of being at peace with you through the new birth so I come to you, in all my unfaithfulness. Thank you that Jesus died in my place, as my substitute and that He rose again on the third day. I believe and now I receive the gift of forgiveness so I can be at peace with you, so I can have inner peace and so I can be at peace with others. Enable me now to share this good news of peace with others as you change me from the inside out for your glory. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

Closing Video: "O Come All You Unfaithful"

Benediction: "Now may the **Lord of peace** Himself **give you peace** at all times and in every way. The Lord be with all of you."