



# GOOD NEWS: PEACE IN A DIVIDED WORLD

*Peace Speaks “Calm” When Everything Whispers “Worry”*

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## FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

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Scripture: Isaiah 9:2,6; Ephesians 2:14-18(NIV)

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## Summary

Peace in a broken world is elusive, fleeting, and just hard to find. Not only is this true socially, but it's also true personally. People tend to approach life with the conviction that if they control their circumstances they can control their inner peace. The last sermon in the Good News series asks: how do we find peace in the midst of chaos and confusion? It then provides a different strategy for rediscovering genuine peace from a genuine Jesus. The solution is not only revolutionary in today's world, but it can change how you live.

## INTRODUCTION

When you hear the word “peace” what comes to mind? Is it the song “Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me”? Or “Sleep in heavenly peace”? Is it the book by Leo Tolstoy – *War and Peace*? Perhaps it is the marking that is put on headstones in a cemetery – RIP – Rest in Peace? Or do you think about the cry of every mother and father everywhere when their kids are rambunctiously running and shouting and crying and laughing as parents are trying to get them to calm down – “ALL I WANT IS A LITTLE PEACE AND QUIET!” (all caps intended!) Or how about these words? Wholeness? Oneness? Unity? Completion? Good News? Are those the words we think of when we hear the word “peace”? Usually not.

Paul wrote about peace when he wrote the letter we call Ephesians. Many scholars think this excellent treatise was probably a circular letter, meant to be shared among the 1<sup>st</sup> century congregations in Asia. Because Paul had helped to plant many of these churches and had a special interest in helping them to grow spiritually, it is thought that he wrote several letters to churches, hoping they would read them and then pass them on to the next church. As the spiritual father of the congregations, he was constantly committed to discipling them, so they would grow to be a strong positive influence in the early 1<sup>st</sup> century communities.

One of Paul's most cherished letters, then, is the book of Ephesians. Because he brings an understanding to the impact of the presence of Jesus Christ, he addresses the influence Jesus' salvation has on the way we look at this word “peace”...on the way we look at others... and at our interpretation of the events going on around us. Paul speaks directly to the idea of peace. You see, our souls long for peace. We need moments where we can simply allow a stillness and a

sense of serenity wash over us. Concepts like harmony, tranquility, and a calm mind help us become at rest with ourselves and the world. When we are one with nature and with humanity and with God – no matter what is swirling around us – that is peace. We need to have that peace we long for. You see, **Christian peace has always been something independent of outward circumstances.** It is not dependent on the surrounding situations.

As we welcome this last week of Advent and look to the coming of the Christ Child, we ask – can we hope for such peace? How do we find peace in the midst of chaos and confusion? Where is peace?

## **I. PEACE IS THE PURSUIT OF COMPLETENESS**

*“He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances that He might create in Himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace...17 so He came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who are near. 18 For through Him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father.” Eph. 2:15,17-18*

Just what is peace? εἰρήνη – (E-rein–E), from which comes a woman’s name you might know – Irene, is the Greek word Paul uses here in this text to translate as “peace”. The actual meaning is “to join, to bind together that which has been separated, to weave together.” Oddly, it is connected with another Greek word that we know well – λέγω – lego – those tiny blocks that are scattered around our floors waiting to cause us to stumble and fall as we painfully step on them in the middle of the night. Lego means “to lay, to arrange, to gather to become one entity joined from many small pieces.” Often λέγω is translated “to speak” – to join words together in a sentence or statement.

These two words - εἰρήνη and λέγω – can be similarly translated in meaning and frequently have been used to mean “to join,” **to become one out of that which was separated.** It reminds us of the phrase on the original Great Seal of the United States – *E pluribus unum*.... “out of many – one”. Peace, then, is a sense of completeness or wholeness.

In spite of our frequent way of defining peace in the negative (ie. absence of war), εἰρήνη is not a negative concept in the Bible. Never in the Bible is it regarded as absence of trouble, hardship or distress, but instead, it is everything calculated to make a full, complete life inwardly. εἰρήνη denotes positive content, not an absence of negative circumstances. Look at *Isaiah 9:2* – “*The people walking in darkness have seen a great light”.* Peace **is not the absence of a negative, like war, but a presence of something positive, something bringing wholeness and fulfillment.**

As an example – it is not healthy, nor is it natural, for your body to fight with itself. God created our body to function together as one. When the organs work as one, each part of the body fulfilling its role, the body is far more productive – and you feel better! It functions as it was created to function. Every part has a job, and every part does its job. The body is at peace with itself. As soon as a body part stops doing its job, the rest of the body has to accommodate that malfunction! The rest of the body has to compensate. This causes disease in the body. And disease shatters the body’s peace. Peace in the body is the body parts functioning together – as one.

Elie Wiesel, the famous Jewish holocaust survivor and author, stated that the opposite of peace is indifference. If the body is separate from or indifferent to the rest of the body – the body will not be at peace. Peace is functioning together – interdependent and working as one.

## II. PEACE IS THE PERFECT PLAN OF GOD

*“For He is our peace; in His flesh He has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is the hostility between us.” Ephesians 2:14*

Why do I need peace?

When the Civil War was waged in 1860, President Abraham Lincoln’s ultimate goal was for the states to rejoin the original union and to become one united group of states again. His goal was for unity. This unity was the peace he sought and for which he fought. The eleven states that seceded from the union did not want to be part of a body that worked differently from the way they had come to function. They didn’t want Lincoln as their President. They didn’t want to be unified as a country but wanted to become independent and to do things the way they wanted. They wanted to be divided - to build up a wall dividing the confederate states from the union states. Lincoln knew that until they were rejoined as one United States, there would be no peace. This was no easy task. Breaking down walls never is. It cost him his life.

Paul addressed the dividing wall between the Jewish believers and the Gentile believers. He said that God’s perfect plan was for Jews and Gentiles to become one – one family with one God. Peace is a state of becoming one – not a period of no conflict. God’s will is for us to be one in mind and one in spirit. It does not mean we are one in ideas, strategies, practices or steps toward our goals. It does not mean we will agree on everything. Lincoln knew the states would never agree on everything. Peace is not everything and everyone in total alignment. Unity is hard to achieve. It is challenging and messy and often painful. But if we don’t have all the feet at the table, if someone is not invited or walks away from the negotiations – working and learning and growing together – we can never achieve oneness – we will never achieve peace. Making one out of two – this was God’s perfect plan – this was the King’s peace.

We are **one in need**. As Isaiah (53:6) said, *“All we like sheep have gone astray.”* Part of the wall that divides us is the false notion that one person or group needs salvation more than we do. But because we have each gone astray - have betrayed God, we are each one in need of a Savior.

The first thing we share, then, is the recognition that **each one of us needs the salvation Jesus brings**. Our condition is one. Our salvation is one. This makes us one as humanity. There is no partiality. No one is higher, better, or in a more privileged position. We **become one through God’s salvation**. This brings us peace.

In Ephesians 4:3, Paul makes this plea: *“Make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is ONE body, ONE Spirit, just as you were called to the ONE hope of your calling, ONE Lord, ONE faith, ONE baptism, ONE God and Father of all, above, through and in all”.*

Peace is God’s perfect plan for humanity. Peace comes to us with the knowledge that God is in control, and we don’t have to be – that God knows better than we - and that God loves us, our families, the world, more than we ever can... so much that He became a human, and died so we could have life. Peace is not getting rid of something – it’s accepting Someone as King of our lives. It is not the

absence then of negative situations, but no matter what is going on around us – culturally, politically, in our physical or emotional selves, it is the presence of All that is Good and that good comes from God. It is God’s perfect plan.

There once was a competition that invited artists from all over the region to paint the perfect picture to depict peace. Hundreds of paintings were submitted and finally the judges narrowed their choices to the last three. As they announced their decisions, the audience ooh-ed and ahh-ed at the finalists. Beautiful idyllic paintings of calm, still waters and a gorgeous mountain view with a setting sun bespoke peaceful scenes. But a gasp rose from the crowd as the winner was unveiled. The painting depicted a stormy night, black clouds, lightning, a raging river, with wind whipping the branches of a large tree so that it bowed almost to the water. On that branch, a small bird was nestled, eyes closed, sitting serenely on her nest, calmly riding out the storm. Even in the midst of the tumult, the bird was at peace.

Peace is not an understanding that the world is all right, but a conviction that the world is in God’s hands...I am in God’s hands...God loves this world more than I ever could... and through Jesus Christ the world can be made one. I release my need to control to God’s wiser and stronger and more loving hand.

### **III. PEACE COMES THROUGH THE PRESENCE OF CHRIST**

*“For He is our peace; in His flesh He has made both groups into one...” Ephesians 2:14*

Where does peace come from? *“And you shall bear a son and you shall name him Jesus and he shall save His people from their sins”* the angel told Mary. The sin is separation – division – walls that have made us two instead of one. The sin is the lack of unity with God and with humanity. But the universal reconciliation available to us is in Christ and ONLY in Christ.

**Christ is our peace.** Though we may look elsewhere, Paul reminds us that peace is Christ within us – making us look at the other as one of us. In Luke 1:76-79, when Zachariah names his son John, he proclaims that John will prepare the way for salvation to come to God’s people. It is God’s assurance that there is a Power greater than I am who charts the course of humanity and all time! Because Christ has come to redeem us, **peace is not an absence of conflict, but a confidence in the One who controls the heavens and the earth and who came to earth to make us whole.** Peace is Christ within us, even in the midst of conflict!

William Barclay reminds us that without Christ there is nothing but disunity and disharmony... in nature, in humanity, in eternity, in time and between God and humanity. In this world without Christ, there is only chaos – never peace.

Martin Luther King, Jr. said peace is not the absence of tension but the presence of justice. Justice only comes from God inhabiting our lives and our world. Whether Jew or Gentile, rich or poor, male or female, God’s perfect plan for all of God’s creation is peace. It breaks down every wall that divides us and makes us one, no matter what differences we have.

Jesus' salvation is the presence of God with us. Isaiah said (7:14). *"He shall be called Immanuel"*. The name Immanuel means "God with us". God's presence with us brings us peace. **The unity we have lies not in our similarity but in our Christianity.**

Peace is not agreements, not practices, not rules, not lifestyle, not clothing, not language, not the way we eat or how we vote, not worship, and not by winning a war. It is *"by His flesh we are one."* Because Jesus Christ in His flesh has joined us together with God, we are one...not by doctrine, not by behavior, not by title or denomination, but by Jesus' sacrifice of life so that we might live. It is Christ who makes us one – who breaks down every wall. That is who brings us peace.

And that peace comes with an acceptance of who we are in relationship to Christ and to each other. No matter what our differences, Christ makes us one.

#### **IV. ULTIMATELY PEACE IS THE PROMISE OF GOOD NEWS**

*"...So He came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who are near. For through Him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father."* Ephesians 2:17,18

*"I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. ..."Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."* Luke 2:10,11,14

**The good news IS peace!** Peace which was brought by the presence of Jesus Christ. Anyone now has access to the Father-God through Jesus Christ. EF Scott said "No man ever had a greater vision of Christ than this vision which (Paul) sees in Christ, the One Center in whom all the disunities of life are gathered into one." In the book of Ephesians, Paul teaches us that our relationship with Christ has made all of us one. This peace is available to anyone who wants it. It is not limited to our nationality or our pocketbook. It is not limited to who our parents are or whether we were raised in the church. It is available to all, for Christ died for all – for you and for me alike.

Mother Teresa said "If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten we belong to each other." **We are one. Not because of anything we did or anything we are but all because of what Christ has done.** Peace is the fulfillment of the promise of Good News. This promise is that the presence of Christ in our lives brings oneness – unity because of God's love for each of us.

This week we will all celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ. I want to offer you the opportunity to receive this gift of peace. If you are tired of chaos and confusion – take His peace. If you are weary of trying to make the pieces of your life fit together – take His peace. If you feel at war with yourself and with others – take His peace. Rest in the salvation of the One who God sent to bring you peace – Jesus Christ. He does not promise to work out everything to your liking. He does not take away the noise and the clatter. He does not come to make you rich or famous or to put gifts under your Christmas tree. Christ comes to bring peace...peace to your soul and an assurance that you don't have to be in control any more. Christ comes to help you to learn to care for all people – because God cared for each one of us enough to die for us.

Once we have invited Jesus into our lives, Barclay encourages us that **"We can shake the world with the all-inclusive Christ."** It is possible – but only through Jesus Christ within us.



A beloved old Christmas carol comes from a poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Two of the verses say:

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.”

Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:  
“God is not dead, nor doth He sleep;  
The wrong shall fail, the right prevail  
With peace on earth, good will to men.”

As we celebrate this miraculous birth this week, I encourage you to remember, Jesus came to bring us peace. He came to break down the walls that make us at war with ourselves and with one another. Peace only comes when we are made one through Him. Jesus brings unity within ourselves and unity with humanity. That unity brings peace.