

# CHRISTMAS GIFTS

HOPE.PEACE.LOVE.JOY

## Week 2: PEACE

### Discussion Questions

1. What do you understand by the word 'peace'?
2. Do you think the world longs for peace? If so, what type of peace? Why might this be so challenging to achieve without God?
3. Do you think you need peace with God?

#### Read Luke 2:11-22

4. What is not meant by the type of peace announced by the angels (v.14)?
5. So, what is the type of peace that the angels are announcing? (Be sure also to think about some of the words from the carol 'Hark! The Herald Angels Sing' and also Zechariah's Song [Luke 1:67-79].)
6. In verse 11, Luke gives three titles for Jesus: Saviour, Messiah, and Lord. What do you understand each of these titles to mean? How is it significant that Jesus is all three?
7. Why was it so amazing the God chose the shepherds to announce and witness this amazing event in history? Who does God speak this news to today?
8. How do the shepherds respond to the good news? How should we receive this glorious news as a gift?
9. How can we have certainty of peace with God?
10. Is absolute peace possible without the peace of God?
11. How does 'peace with God' enable us to be peacemakers (i.e., making peace in the world) and also 'peace-experiencers' (that is, the experience of internal peace)?
12. If we cannot realise absolute peace internationally, relationally, or internally, why would we try? (Especially think about what the world will look like when Jesus returns.)

#### Read Ephesians 2:11-22

13. What were the particular challenges being faced by the Ephesians?
14. How does the author suppose that peace is possible amidst such a diverse group?
15. How is that true for us as a church?
16. In what way is the Christian message of peace radically different to that of Buddhism or new age philosophies?
17. How can we never take for granted the peace of God?

## Talk 2/4 (Luke 2:8-14 & Ephesians 2:11-22): 9/12/12

“CHRISTMAS GIFTS: Peace” by The Rev’d Adam Lowe

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### Introduction

#### *Peace - oh, how nice*

PEACE. Oh, it sounds so nice doesn’t it? Ah, peace, I wouldn’t mind a bit of peace. I’m sure at the top of your Christmas Lists, you’ve all got ‘peace’ written?

Now it must be pretty important of course, because you see the word *peace* everywhere at Christmas. It’s got to be one of the most popular words on cards, you see it on banners in the shopping centre, and they even print the word on shopping catalogues despite the fact that they don’t sell it and they basically provide the opposite. But regardless, everyone seems to recognise at some level that *Christmas* and *peace* go together.

Now we shouldn’t be surprised by this; after all, probably one of the most famous parts of the Bible is the angelic decree to the shepherds that we heard read in Luke 2. Most people know it as:

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<sup>14</sup> Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men. (K&JV)

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But actually, that’s the old King James version, and it doesn’t pick up the nuance of what’s in the original language. This version kind of sounds like that from this moment - the birth of Jesus - there will be peace and goodwill *between people*. And of course that’s a very palatable message, it’s something very nice - but it’s not something that makes someone end up on a cross.

But you know what, I did some extensive research this week, and as I read The Age, and the SMH, even the New York Times, and the BBC, I discovered something that will astound you.

There appears to be a distinct absence of peace in the world.

What’s most shocking of course is that we don’t find that shocking. We, at some level, have come to accept that it’s just the way things are. That’s why if on Christmas day you opened up your one-and-only present and it said ‘peace’, you’d probably be disappointed. Because you’d probably think, how quaint, but I don’t think it’s going to be a reality.

See, we don’t really need to look that far to see the absence of peace, do we? I mean, I’m sure to some degree in the past few weeks alone, you’ve all witnessed disharmony even in your closest relationships.

So does that mean that the angels got it wrong, or were just being a tad optimistic? No, the NIV gets the translation much better.

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Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests. (Luke 2:14)

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It’s all about the direction of the peace.

Can you imagine that night? Being a shepherd in the first century could be a pretty lonely job. Travelling vast distances, you’ve got the sheep for company (a few mates here too), keeping watch during those quiet hours of the night. Then boom, the angels appear, the shepherds are terrified! But this is the news they hear: a child has been born - he is the Messiah, he is Christ and Lord - and he brings not fear, *but peace*.

Christmas and Peace go together, *because of Jesus*. Jesus was born to bring peace. But what type of *peace on earth* does Jesus bring?

### 1. What type of ‘Peace on earth’?

Well, perhaps it’s helpful if we first look at what’s *not meant* by the peace that Jesus brings. So, what it isn’t...

### a. What it isn't (a)

It's not international or political peace. Well that's pretty clear isn't it, we know that from watching the news. But perhaps even more significantly, you don't have to flick too far forward in Luke to see Jesus talking about the very reality of future wars, of nation against nation.

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<sup>10</sup>Then he said to them: Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. (Luke 21)

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That doesn't mean that we shouldn't be seeking peace... *blessed are the peacemakers*, but it's just not the type of peace that is being spoken about primarily here.

### b. What it isn't (b)

It's also not *internal* or *psychological* peace. When you love God, do you have access to a peace that passes all understanding? You bet! But it still doesn't mean that following Jesus is easy. Jesus said:

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<sup>51</sup> Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division. <sup>52</sup> From now on there will be five in one family divided against each other, three against two and two against three. <sup>53</sup> They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law. (Luke 12)

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Jesus is by no means providing rationale for religious war. He's saying that when you follow me, it will disturb you. It will disrupt your life. It will challenge you, because you will be changed. And there will be people who are angry at you, for no other reason than 'because you love Jesus'.

*Are you to be peace-makers - yes.*

*Will you experience an internal peace - yes.*

*But these will only be relative, they won't be complete and absolute.*

*They will be absolute one day, but just not yet.*

The peace here is something concrete and real that we can receive in full *now on earth*. It's not international or internal peace, it's *peace with God*.

### c. What it is: Peace with God

Just preceding this chapter, there's a glorious song of Zechariah. Zechariah was the father of the John the Baptist - whose entire ministry was to prepare the way for Jesus.

And so, Zechariah describes his son's purpose like this (Luke 1):

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<sup>76</sup> And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, <sup>77</sup> to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, <sup>78</sup> because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven <sup>79</sup> to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace.

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Like the rising sun, a new age has dawned. That even though we once were living in the shadows of sin and death, we are now freed through the forgiveness of sins. *We now have peace with God*.

At the period when this news came, the people of the land were experiencing a relative peace. I say relative, because there weren't necessarily any big wars being waged. I say relative, because the people had been dominated by the Romans, and that brought with it a certain stability, as long as you did what the Romans wanted.

It was known as the *pax romana* - the Roman Peace. But it wasn't an absolute peace. Some even critiqued it, saying "they make war and call it peace".

But the peace that Jesus brings - is absolute. Because whilst in the past the chasm of sin separated us, through the cross, through forgiveness we're now reconciled. Paul describes it like this:

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<sup>1</sup> Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>2</sup> through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand.

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It's perfect peace with God.

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Hark! The herald angels sing, Glory to the newborn King! Peace on earth, and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled.

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If you want to understand that peace announced to the shepherds, then you've got to understand the direction of that peace. The angels are not announcing a horizontal peace, they're announcing a vertical peace.

And it all centres on Jesus.  
Christmas and Peace go together, because Jesus is our peace.

## 2. Why do we need it and how do we get it?

### *a. Is this a relevant gift?*

So it's not international peace or internal peace, *it's peace with God.*

Now some people will be offended by me saying that we even need peace with God. You might be thinking, I'm not waging a war with God. I'm for God, not against God. But we've got to remember that in our brokenness, in our sin, it's always been the nature of humanity to rail against each other, and rail against God - because ultimately we want to be the boss.

I mean, I wonder for a moment if any of you with children had to teach your child to lie. *Or did they do that all on their own?*

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She was meant to be napping, but I'd heard some footsteps.. I got to the top of the stairs to see her streak out of my room and race into hers - throwing herself on her bed and closing her eyes!!!! I have NO idea what she was doing in my room, but I'm guessing it was naughty!!!

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Just as children don't need to be taught to rebel against their parents, we haven't been taught to rebel against God. Yet we do. But because of Jesus, we're made clean and there needs not be hostility between us.

So often in life we can be willing to get help from God, but not peace from God. But, the main need for humanity is reconciliation. Peace with God is a gift relevant to every single person who has ever lived.

### *b. How we receive it*

*So how do we receive it?* By receiving Jesus. If you receive Jesus as your Saviour - King and God, then you have received peace with God.

We have the gift in front of us, we just need to receive it, unwrap it. But often there's two traps people fall into that stops them from saying yes to God's gift in Jesus.

**The first trap is to say, I'm not worthy enough.** Well, to that, shepherds had some of the lowest social status of anyone in the first century, yet God chose them to reveal the greatest news of history. God chose them to reveal the true identity of the child. Saviour, Messiah, and Lord. And in the same way, Jesus offers peace to all of us, regardless of our status.

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<sup>10</sup> But the angel said to them, Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. <sup>11</sup> Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.

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It's news for ALL people.

**The second trap that people fall into is to thinking that peace with God is something that must be earned.** Well friends, the point is that we can never earn it. It's a gift to be received. I mean, imagine if upon hearing this news, the Shepherds said, oh how nice, and then carried on their way. Their response?

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<sup>17</sup> When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, <sup>18</sup> and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them... <sup>20</sup> The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

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They heard, went, saw, believed, and told.

### 3. What is the fruit?

#### a) Peace-making and peace-receiving

We're told that this gift really is the gift that keeps on giving. Well friends, nothing compares with the peace of God. When you know the peace of God there's plenty of fruit that flows out of it.

When we have peace with God, we're enabled to be peacemakers and peace-receivers. That makes sense doesn't it. We can only know peace in other areas - international and internal - if we have received peace from the source.

The passage from the letter to the Ephesians this morning is like a little case-study of the peace of God in action through believers. In that community, there were all sorts of divisions that had taken place. And the author makes the point really clear that they will only ever begin to have peace amidst them, if they first acknowledge that God is the source of peace.

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<sup>14</sup> For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, <sup>15</sup> by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, <sup>16</sup> and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.

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*The logic goes like this:* you were all strangers from God; you are now one in Christ, therefore there should be no hostility between you.

Through the cross we're reconciled to each other, because we're are reconciled to God. That means before we are male or female, rich or poor, from locally or further away, our primary defining attribute is that we are in Christ.

Sounds nice, but it's hard in practice. That's why we've got to keep drawing on God instead of ourselves. Religions like Buddhism assert that peace will end when suffering ends, and suffering will end when you follow a set of teachings perfectly. How's that working out?

After every major war, people believe that a new age of peace has dawned. But it isn't long before warring occurs again. It's just not within our capacity alone to bring peace to the world.

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I mean sometimes it can be so silly. Have you ever found yourself in the position when you're in a heated discussion with someone, and then at some point in the argument you've forgotten what you were actually fighting about in the first place? And then, in fear of being proven wrong, you just let it go on and escalate?

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We can't bring peace alone - not even in our relationships. It's similar with regards to internal peace too. New age philosophy talks about finding inner peace by focusing on your own inner energy, but it isn't long before that doesn't work out either.

*The Christian message is radically different.* With the coming of Jesus peace is not found by inner strength, but in the gift of a Saviour. When he returns, his peace will rule perfectly internationally and internally too. But in the meantime we can rest in the reality that we have absolute peace with God.

That whilst we can never achieve perfect peace amongst people, we're empowered to be peacemakers because we know peace wins

### Conclusion

So Hope, and now Peace.

Two amazing gifts that money can't buy, and we can't produce alone.

I don't think Christmas Gifts get any better than that. The relationship with our God fully reconciled.

Christmas and Peace go together, because of Jesus. There's lots of places to look for it.

But there's only once place you'll actually find it. In a manger that leads to a cross. Jesus, is our peace.