

## **CHRISTMAS: JESUS IS PEACE**

**Isaiah 9:6-7**

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**Pastor Nathan J. Thompson**

Sometimes, when we think of the birth of Jesus in the manger at Bethlehem we think that it happened on a quiet and peaceful night. In fact, the pictures and images we often see seem to imply quiet and solitude. The carols imply it was a silent night where all was calm.

Yet the truth is that night, as well as that time in history, was anything but calm. For example, Bethlehem itself was so filled with people there for the census that all the lodging and rooms were full, and the streets and corners were filled with edgy and agitated people.

I liked the scene in The Nativity movie where Joseph is shown carrying Mary in his arms, frantically crying out that they needed a place to stay. It depicted that Mary was in labor and the baby was coming very soon. It was more frantic and desperate, rather than smooth and calculated, like most Christian movies/plays seem to show.

Their world at that time was anything but peaceful. The Jewish people were under the domination of the Roman government, their taxes and treatment was often harsh. The ruler Herod was so paranoid about the prophecies of a new king being born that he ordered all the children under 2-years old to be killed.

Yes, the world that Jesus was born into was harsh, cruel and chaotic. Yet that is why he came. He came to be the prince of peace; he came to show that God's heart and purpose for this world is centered in peace—a peace that passes all understanding.

It is very appropriate, therefore, as we look at our world today to remember that Jesus came to this world to bring the gift of peace. As wars continue in Afghanistan/Syria; as Israel and Palestine continue their age-old battles; as our nation is more polarized than ever politically; as relationships and families continue to unravel, Jesus' gift of peace is as relevant now as any time in history.

Our prayer then each day should be, "Jesus, please give us peace." God, please bring the peace of Jesus to our war-torn world. God, please bring this peace of Jesus to our divided nation. God, please bring this peace of Jesus to my heart, to my life, to my relationships, to my world.

However, you may find this idea of peace to be kind of a paradox at Christmas. This season in itself, of course, is often the opposite of peaceful. With lots of added busyness, schedules out of control and shopping stores filled with chaos it is often difficult to see anything peaceful.

I heard the story of two men who lived on the Florida coast, how they dropped their wives off at the mall one afternoon and they went sailing out on the ocean. As they were enjoying some good winds, all of a sudden a terrible storm came up. They were blown and tossed so severely by this storm that they capsized in their boat.

As they hung on for dear life to their upside-down boat, with their heads and bodies bobbing in the large waves, the one man said to the other, “Wow, this sure beats the chaos of the shopping mall!” As you I’m sure understand, in many ways this may be truer than you think.

So what about this peace within us? Social scientists say that a lot of the anxiety and stresses of today come from rapid change. We all know that kind of change is almost off the charts. Our world today is built on change.

Perhaps some of you have seen the charts that list stress points for things like changing jobs, moving to a new home, getting married, having a baby, facing a traumatic illness, etc. It is amazing how some of you are dealing with several of these stressful changes right now, today. No wonder life often seems out of control.

The government says it costs the U.S. economy hundreds of billions of dollars a year due to stress related problems. A former surgeon general pronounced that a large percentage of illnesses prior to age 65 are preventable and directly due to stress. Stress is definitely taking a toll on all of us.

So isn’t it good news that God places peace at the center of Christmas? Yet the thing we need to realize is that the Bible makes it clear that God has a different perspective on peace than we often do. God’s peace centered in Jesus Christ is more than our often idealized vision.

For example, we often think of peace as the absence of something. We think that if we could only get rid of some tasks, or simplify our schedules, or have more time to sit and do nothing, that then we will find peace and tranquility. Or if we could take more time at the lake, or more pampered vacations, then we would relax and find peace.

Peace in the Bible, however, is rooted in the Hebrew word, “shalom.” This word, shalom, is not about the absence of something, but about being connected. It is about wholeness, about being settled and secure. It is not the absence of trouble, or busy schedules, but is found in having the presence of God in us by faith.

I am very troubled today by people who often say they are too busy for worship, for Bible study, for a small group. Some say that they believe that relaxing at home, at the lake, on the golf course or being involved in kids activities is going to bring them more peace.

Yet in many cases these have become the crutches that people are deceived into thinking will bring them peace. Whether it is our possessions, our vacation in exotic places, our kids activities, more time to relax, or pills or whatever, these will not take away the conflicts in our hearts and give us peace.

In fact, I guarantee that if you put God as number one in you. If you take time for regular worship and develop a regular time for prayer, that you will find God’s peace. Putting God first will help you better prioritize your time, will get you connected with a small group who will support you, and will help you know God’s presence in whatever you face.

And that, my friends, leads to the Biblical word, shalom. Peace is not found in this world's self-help plans, but is rather found in being connected on a deeper level with God, with other believers and with our faith. It is then you will find peace in all its beauty and wholeness.

Billy Graham, through his 60+ years of preaching, has often laid out the four steps where you can find true peace with God. I remember hearing him share this message when I was a young boy, as well as in recent years, and each time I hear it I renew and recommit my life to Jesus.

The first step to find peace is to recognize God's plan. God loves you and wants to give you his plan that begins with the gift of eternal life. However, millions of people are missing out on salvation because they do not know that they are lost and headed for eternal destruction.

Only when people recognize that they need to trust Jesus Christ alone as their Savior from their sins can they recognize God's plan for their life. Jesus said in John 3:16, *"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."*

The second step is to realize the fundamental problem...that we are separated from God. People chose to disobey God and go their own way. When sin entered the world because of Adam & Eve's disobedience death passed to all people. The Bible says in Romans 3:24, *"for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."*

So step three is to respond to God's remedy which is centered in the cross of Christ. Jesus died, was buried and resurrected from the dead to provide the sacrificial atonement for the forgiveness of all our past, present and future sins, if we will respond to his love with faith.

It is not enough for us to just simply say we believe in Jesus. God calls us to place our trust in Jesus Christ as the substitutionary payment for our sins. God calls us to trust in Jesus as our faithful Lord and Savior.

The final step is to receive God's son by faith as our Savior and Lord. As God builds the bridge and comes to us in Jesus, each person then becomes a member of God's family when you ask God to come into your life and receive him by faith and trust in his promises.

The Bible says in John 1:12, *"Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed on his name, he gave the right to become children of God."* So today, right now we can pray that prayer of commitment:

"Lord Jesus, I know that I am a sinner. I believe you died for my sins. Right now, I turn from my sins and open the door of my heart and life. I receive you as my loving Lord and Savior. Thank you for saving me. Amen."

My friends, Jesus came to this earth at Christmas and he is the prince of peace. Let us all put our faith and trust in Jesus, our Savior and Lord. The good news is that God doesn't want to give you just some artificial or temporary peace; he wants to give you his peace which passes all understanding.