“Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, good will toward men” (Luke 2:14, KJV).

It is almost two thousand years ago. A group of shepherds is in a field outside the village of Bethlehem. It is a beautiful evening and the shepherds stand, gazing at the glories of heaven.

Suddenly, a light shines all around them and they look up at a glowing, white-robed creature. Terrified, the men are rooted in their tracks. Then, with a vibrant voice, the angel, for such it was, speaks:

Be not afraid; for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be to all the people: for there is born to you this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord. And this is the sign unto you: ye shall find a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, and lying in a manger (Luke 2:10–12).

Then suddenly, the sky is filled with heavenly beings, singing in a heavenly chorus. And their song is “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men” (Luke 2:14).

Then as suddenly as they came, they are gone. For several minutes, however, to the shepherds it is as though the light still shone and the voices still sang; their eyes are dazzled and the voices still ring in their ears.

Gradually, however, they return to normal. Then, as one man, they look at each other and say, “Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing that is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us” (Luke 2:15).

With little more than a backward look, they leave their huddled flock and make their way down the stony slope on their way to the city.

Thus begins one of the most familiar of all stories. In this sermon, I would like to emphasize one part of the scene just witnessed.

In the Old Testament, the coming of Christ had been spoken of in this fashion:

For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there shall be no end, . . . (Isaiah 9:6; italics mine).

Speaking of the coming of Christ, Ezekiel had said: “Moreover I will make a covenant of peace with them; it shall be an everlasting covenant. . . .” (Ezekiel 37:26; italics mine).

The Book of Hebrews tells us Christ is our spiritual Melchizedek, who was the “King of Salem, which is, King of peace” (Hebrews 7:2; italics mine).

How appropriate then are the words of the heavenly choir: “On earth peace among men.”

Of all the announcements ever made from God to man, I suppose none has stirred the imagination like this one. For instance, one very beautiful seasonal song begins like this:

If I had my way this [season],
If all I could wish could be;
Of all the great wishes in a wonderful world,
I’d only wish for three.

And if I could have three wishes,
And if my first wish came true,
There’d be peace on earth, good will among men,
And love in all that we do.

Can you imagine a world like that?
What a wonderful world it would be!
And then I would wish it could go on forever
For people like you and me.

How our hearts long for a world like the area described in 1 Chronicles 4:40: “the land was wide, and quiet, and peaceable.”

But today we must face the facts. As much as we desire it, in the full sense of the word, there will never be “peace” on all the earth, and we will never have the situation of all men having good will one to another.
In Revelation 6:4 the Red Horse was turned loose on the earth: “And to him that sat thereon it was given to take peace from the earth, and that they should slay one another: and there was given unto him a great sword.”

That dread Horseman is riding and will continue to ride until time shall be no more. Jesus said, “And ye shall hear of wars and rumors of wars” (Matthew 14:6).

It is interesting to note that at the time the angels sang their song of peace, the world was enjoying one of its few respite from war. At that exact moment the Roman Empire was at peace with all the world. And as was their practice, the Romans had closed the gates of the temple of Janus at Rome because they felt they did not need that god in times of peace. But the gates of Janus were all too quickly thrown open again! In fact, just seventy years after the visit of the angels to the shepherds’ field, you could have stood in that same field and seen the flames of the city of Jerusalem leap high into the sky and possibly, just possibly, you could even have heard the cries of the thousands of victims as the Romans sacked that city.

No, we must face the fact: We cannot expect peace to reign throughout the world and all men to be filled with good will.

But then someone asks, If this is not the significance of this angelic proclamation, what do these words mean?

Perhaps other translations of Luke 2:14 will help. The New English Bible says, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth his peace for men on whom his favor rests.” Phillip says, “Glory to God in the highest heaven! Peace upon earth among men of good will!”

Luke 2:14 is a promise of God’s peace—but only to those who have His good will, only to those who do His will.

Peace on all the earth is a possibility—if all on the earth do His will. Moses said to Israel in the long ago: “If ye walk in my statutes, and keep my commandments, and do them; ... I will give peace in the land, and ye shall lie down, and none shall make you afraid” (Leviticus 26:3, 6).

But from a practical and biblical standpoint, all men will not do the will of God (Matthew 7:13, 14) and thus will not have God’s good will, and worldwide peace will not reign.

So peace will not reign through the world... and it will not reign in every community... and it will not reign in every home... and it will not reign in every heart—but (and this is the main message of this lesson) it can reign in your heart. Jesus said, “Peace I leave you: My peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be fearful” (John 14:27).

A Christian is one who loves peace (Matthew 5:9); a Christian is one who “seeks peace and pursues it” (Psalm 34:14); and a Christian is one—and the only one—who can have “the peace of God which passeth understanding” (Philippians 4:7).

A William Cowper poem can be adapted:

Those Christians best deserve the name
Who studiously make peace their aim;
Peace, both the duty and the prize
Of him that [seeks] and him that [tries].

Let us then spend a little time studying the subject of peace in general. (I was surprised to find how much the Bible says about it!) Let us especially ask these questions: What peace can we have? What peace should we seek? How can we have this peace?

I. PEACE WITH GOD

The timing of the angels’ song would help you to know that peace with God is the main significance of the theme of their song: Man had gone away from God, had become His enemy. Now Jesus was born of a virgin, the God/Man, the one qualified to make peace between God and man (1 Timothy 2:5). The end result is spoken of in Romans 5:1: “Being therefore justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” (Italics mine.)

Ephesians 2:16–18 says,

And [Christ] might reconcile them both [Jews and Gentiles] in one body unto God through the cross, having slain the enmity thereby: and he came and preached peace to you that were far off, and peace to them that were nigh: for through him we both have our access in one spirit unto the Father.

And how do we have this peace with God through Christ? We have it by submission to His will: “Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father who is in
heaven” (Matthew 7:21); “And without faith it is impossible to be well-pleasing unto him; for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarde[er] of them that seek after him” (Hebrews 11:6); “And now why tarriest thou? Arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on His name” (Acts 22:16).

As the angels sang that song, they would have realized that any other peace we enjoy—within ourselves or with others, here or hereafter—was dependent upon this peace with God.

Too many who are trying to be peacemakers in our world are trying to do it without God. And too many who desire peace of mind are seeking it everywhere except through God. And too many who think they have peace from God are deceived because they are not doing His will. These are such as say, “Peace, peace: when there is no peace” (Jeremiah 6:14).

If you therefore desire peace, first of all make sure of your peace with God. Are you one of His? Are you doing His will?

From peace with God, we next go logically to this peace.

II. PEACE WITHIN SELF

The logical result of peace with God should be peace within self—and peace within self is the source of peace with others. In Psalm 122:7, 8 David begins by saying, “Peace be within thy walls, and prosperity within thy palaces” and then he says, “Peace be within thee.” (Italics mine.) Colossians 3:15 says, “And let the peace of God rule in your hearts.” (Italics mine.)

And what is this peace within self? Isaiah 32:17 gives the finest answer I have ever seen. Using synonymous parallelism, the author says, “And the work of righteousness shall be peace; and the effect of righteousness, quietness and confidence forever.” “Peace” is used interchangeably with “quietness” and “confidence.” Don’t you like that? And it is the “work of righteousness.”

All this suggests the basic source of this peace within self—it is trust in God and our relationship to Him. Isaiah 26:3 says, “Thou wilt keep Him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on Thee; because he trusteth in Thee.” John 16:33 says, “These things have I spoken unto you, that in me ye may have peace. In the world ye have tribulation: but be of good cheer: I have over-
2:4) and when the lion would lie down with the lamb (Isaiah 51). As we have seen, this could not refer to a coming universal situation on the earth. It was rather a prophecy concerning the kingdom of God and referred to the basic changes that were to exist among the people of God: God’s people were to become peacemakers (Matthew 5:9). God’s people were to be followers of peace (2 Timothy 2:22) and counselors of peace (Proverbs 12:20).

While, of course, peace with others is not always possible (Romans 12:18) and while peace is never to be sought at the price of forsaking the will of God (Zechariah 8:19; Matthew 10:34–47; Luke 12:51–53; James 3:17), God’s people are basically to be people of peace, who try to get along with other people and who promote peace on the earth: “Follow after peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no man shall see the Lord: . . . (Hebrews 12:14).

Here again we return to our text—and what it brought about in the world. Through the Prince of Peace, we can become brothers in Christ (Ephesians 2:16)!

There are several areas that should concern every Christian.

First we should seek peace in the home. Our wish for every home is found in 1 Samuel 25:6: “Peace be unto thee, and peace be to thine house, and peace be unto all that thou hast.” How can that be? Romans 14:19 says, “So then let us follow after things which make for peace, . . .” (Italics mine.)

I am afraid Thomas A. Kempis was right: “All men desire peace, but very few desire those things that make for peace.” Petrarch put his finger on part of the problem when he said, “Five great enemies of peace inhabit with us—avarice, ambition, envy, anger, and pride; if these were to be banished, we should infallibly enjoy perpetual peace.” And I like the statement “The peace of God not only passes all understanding (Philippians 4:7); it also passes all misunderstanding.”

Second, we should seek peace within the church. One of the most beautiful of all New Testament passages and one of the greatest challenges is in Ephesians 4:3: “Giving diligence to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” How we should work for “the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace”!

Of course, we must keep in mind this truth (spoken by Spinoza): “Peace is not absence of war, it is a virtue, a state of mind, a disposition for benevolence”—in other words, it is an active thing. Alan Bryan has noted that there is a type of peace in the cemetery; some brethren think they are at peace when really they are just dead.

Third, we should seek peace within the world. We began by saying that universal peace on the part of everyone is not the impact of Luke 2:14—but this is not to say that we should not labor for as much peace as can be managed in a sinful world. First Timothy 2:1, 2 says that we should pray that peace might prevail so there will be an atmosphere most conducive to living godly lives.

It is possible that some of “our” young men (or young women) might someday be ambassadors working for peace, but though you may never be, you too can work for peace—by living your own peaceful life.

An old Chinese proverb says, “If there is righteousness in the heart, there will be beauty in the character, and if there is beauty in the character, there will be harmony in the home, and if there is harmony in the home, there will be order in the nation, and if there is order in the nation, there will be peace in the world.”

We will go a long way toward world peace when we learn to “love our neighbor” regardless of any superficial differences. In the word of another seasonal song:

Let there be peace on earth,
And let it begin with me;
Let there be peace on earth,
The peace that was meant to be.

With God as our Father,
Brothers all are we;
Let me walk with my brother
In perfect harmony.

Let peace begin with me;
Let this be the moment now;
With every step I take,
Let this be my solemn vow.

To take each moment,
And live each moment,
In peace eternally:
Let there be peace on earth,
And let it begin with me.

Let us then be concerned about peace with God, which is vitally related to peace within our-
selves, and should result in our trying to live at peace with others.

But, of course, any peace we can know on this earth will always be marred by the world in which we live—so there is one last area of the topic that we need to notice.

Fourth, we must look for the peace in heaven. In the Bible, many different phrases are used to describe hell—but surely no phrase is more apt than to say it is a place of no peace.

The Bible says that those that disobey God shall not have peace: “Destruction cometh; and they shall seek peace, and there shall be none” (Ezekiel 7:25); “When they are saying, Peace and safety; then sudden destruction cometh upon them as travail upon a woman with child; and they shall in no wise escape” (1 Thessalonians 5:3). Hell itself is described as a place where “the worm dieth not and the fire is not quenched”—always there will be the gnawing of conscience and the agony of separation from God!

But on the other hand, heaven might be beautifully described as a place of peace. How appropriate those words used interchangeably with “peace” earlier: “quietness” and “confidence”! Heaven is where the soul shall at last know that perfect and complete peace and satisfaction!

CONCLUSION

As we close this study of “peace,” let me leave you with these benedictions: “Jehovah bless thee, and keep thee. Jehovah make his face to shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee: Jehovah lift up his countenance upon thee, and give thee peace” (Numbers 6:24–26); “Now the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times in all ways. The Lord be with you all” (2 Thessalonians 3:16); “Finally, brethren, farewell. Be perfect; be comforted, be of the same mind, live in peace: and the God of love and peace shall be with you” (2 Corinthians 13:11).

Throughout the year, and not just for a few weeks, may we let these words inspire us to greater efforts at peacemaking: “Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, good will toward men.”

Footnotes

2Ibid.
5Ibid.
7Ibid., p. 89.