

**ST. ANDREW'S PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
SANTA BARBARA, CA
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ISAIAH 26: 3-4; LUKE 1: 46-55

**THE FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT
III. "PEACE"
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The word "peace" was largely popularized by the "peace sign" during the hippie movement of the 1960's. But it has been prominent for a lot longer than that. 5000 years ago, the Israelites used a word for "peace" that we still hear today: *shalom*. Peace, in the way we normally define it, means absence of conflict; freedom from commotion or busyness: the kind of peace that we would like on a Sunday afternoon in the fall, when the day is quiet and you can hear a gentle breeze blowing through the trees.

We also think of peace as a cessation of war. When the bombs have stopped flying and the troops are on their way back home, we say that we are at peace and our country is at rest. Truly, the turbulent era of the 60's was a call for peace amidst the war in Vietnam.

We also speak of inner peace; the peace of the soul, or what is sometimes referred to as religious peace. By it, we mean a contentment or an inner calm that may descend upon a person at various times, but especially before some trial – the "calm before the storm," so to speak.

The "perfect peace" promised in the Bible to those who trust in the Lord, however, is distinctly different from the three kinds of peace we've just explored. It is more than a mere absence of conflict. It is distinct from the global cessation of war. It is even separate from a mere religious or inner contentment of the

soul. It is the peace that Mary experienced in Luke 1. The word the Old Testament uses for it, again, is *shalom*.

I first heard that word when I visited a Jewish synagogue many years ago. It was used as a benediction – a blessing from the Rabbi to the people. I was confronted by the word again in seminary when we began to study the Hebrew Bible. What I discovered was that *shalom* is more than a greeting, a benediction, or a blessing: it is a state of being. It means fullness, wholeness, completeness. It is borne out of a relationship with the God of shalom – the God of wholeness – and his son Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace.

Perhaps this kind of peace is a little like the state of being of the fisherman in the account of the fisherman and the rich industrialist. The businessman was disturbed one day to find the fisherman sitting lazily beside his boat.

“Why aren’t you out there fishing?” he asked.

“Because I’ve caught enough fish for today,” responded the fisherman.

“Why don’t you catch more fish than you need?” the rich man inquired.

“What would I do with them?” asked the fisherman.

“You could earn more money,” came the impatient reply, “and buy a better boat so that you could go deeper and catch more fish. You could purchase nylon nets, catch even more fish, and make more money. Soon you’d have a fleet of boats and be rich like me.”

“Then what would I do?” asked the fisherman.

“You could sit down and enjoy life,” said the industrialist.

“What do you think I’m doing now?” the fisherman replied.

You see, true peace is an elusive thing. Genuine wholeness and completeness in our lives is not easily come by in our broken world. How often have we thought ourselves to be at peace, only to have that peace shattered the next moment by a conflict, a concern, or a commotion? What is the secret of true and lasting peace in one's life, of a peace without blemish? Our reading from Isaiah yields three important insights into the secret of a lasting peace. And Mary lives them out in Luke 1. The verse from Isaiah reads, "You, Lord, give perfect peace to those who keep their purpose firm and put their trust in you. Trust in the Lord forever; he will always protect us."

Now, the first insight into gaining lasting peace is that *it is the Lord who gives it*. (Notice that Mary *receives* it from God in Luke 1). "You, Lord, give perfect peace..." reads the passage in Isaiah. Try as we might, we cannot *develop* peace in our own lives; we cannot *manufacture* it; we cannot *work* for it; and we cannot *sustain* it. Rather, peace is a *gift* – a gift from God. The problem is that peace is not a high-profile gift; it is not as popular as other more recognizable gifts of God.

When I was a boy and my sister, Brynn, was about four years old, she wanted a type of life-size toy stove for Christmas. My parents, however, thought that that type of stove was too big and unwieldy for my sister, so they did not buy it for her. Instead, they bought her all sorts of other toys that they knew she would adore. They never gave the stove another thought – that is, until Christmas morning.

That morning, my sister and I tore into the presents piled under the Christmas tree, as it was our wont to do. One by one, we opened our presents. I would ooh and aah over my new treasures, taking a moment to play with each one. But my sister, while she was interested in her opened gifts, hardly looked at each one before she tore open the next. Finally, after opening all of them, she simply

stood up, looked around the room and cried, “Where’s my stove?” My parents were despondent.

God’s peace is like one of my sister’s opened and hastily discarded gifts: sure it’s nice, but we’re always looking for something more – aren’t we? Truth is, however, there is nothing as valuable as God’s peace. When you’ve known somebody who has it, it’s obvious because it affects every area of their life and it spills over into all of their relationships. They are at peace with themselves and their world. When they confront some trial or difficulty, they do it with confidence and strength. Have you ever known a person filled with God’s peace? I have. They certainly could not have manufactured such a peace themselves. They have learned that peace is a gift from God, and they have accepted that gift. Perfect peace is not ours to work at; it is God’s gift to us.

The second insight that we gain from our passage in Isaiah is that God’s peace is given to those who maintain their focus on God. Mary looked right at God. She knew that she needed a Savior! An ancient doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church that is still popular today is the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. It states that because she was to bring to birth the Savior of the world, Mary was therefore without sin. But Mary herself contradicts this doctrine with her own words in Luke 1. She says, “My soul glorifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.” Yes, Mary herself knew that she needed a Savior – and that Savior just happened to be her own son! She was not saved by her motherhood (anymore than we are saved by our motherhood or fatherhood today); rather, she was saved by trusting in the Lord.

“You, Lord, give perfect peace to those who keep their purpose firm,” reads our verse in Isaiah. Getting back to my little sister: had she opened her eyes and taken notice of the fine gifts that were hers for the taking that Christmas morning, she might have forgotten all about the big stove. But of course, she was only four years old! How often we act like four-year-olds when it comes to our

relationship with our Father in Heaven. We know what we want and when we want it, and nothing else will do. Yet, the Lord may know that something we want is too big or unwieldy for us to handle, too much of a temptation, too dangerous for our faith, or that it is just not the right time for it yet. But we look around at our spiritual lives, at all the things God has given us, and instead of saying, "Thank you, Lord," we demand, "Where's my _____?" (*you* fill in the blank). God's perfect peace will only be given to us when we maintain our focus on the Lord Jesus himself and on *who he is*.

The third insight that the passage in Isaiah yields is: God's peace will be given to those who, focusing on God, place their lives into God's hands. Listen to Mary: "My soul glorifies the Lord...for he has been mindful of my humble state." And Isaiah reminds us, "You, Lord, give perfect peace to those who keep their purpose firm and *put their trust in you*." Trust is more than having an intellectual understanding about God. It is even more than saying, "I believe in God" or "I believe in Jesus Christ." Trust is saying, "Jesus Christ, I put my whole life into your hands." Have you done that? Have I?

Perhaps we have heard about the tightrope walker known for braving the heights above Niagara Falls by pushing his wheelbarrow across the falls on a highly-elevated tightrope. (I don't know if this story is apocryphal or not). One day, he asked the crowd who had assembled to watch him, "How many of you believe that I can walk across this tightrope?" Most everyone raised their hands. He walked across and back. Then he asked, "How many of you believe that I can push this wheelbarrow across the tightrope?" Many folks raised their hands. He pushed the wheelbarrow across and back. Next he asked, "How many of you believe that I can push this wheelbarrow across the falls with a *person* in it?" The hands shot up into the air. "So," asked the tightrope walker, "who will be the *first*?"

Not a hand was left in the air. You see, the *difference* between believing and trusting means fully getting into Jesus' wheelbarrow and letting him steer our lives.

Now, it may seem ironic that "perfect peace" could come from risking our lives in Jesus' hands. It would seem that instead of leading to peace, risk would lead to anxiety and fear! But remember, we are not talking about peace in the way the world usually defines it. We are not referring to peace as absence of conflict or even as cessation of war. We are talking about *shalom* – perfect peace: the fullness, wholeness, and completeness of God that comes to us by risking – by placing our entire lives into God's hands.

That same God has made many promises to us in Scripture. In one of those promises, God says, "I will never leave you or forsake you" (Hebrews 13: 5). In other words, through Jesus Christ, God has fixed his affections and commitment on us. We are the beloved of God – God loves us. Therefore, what real risk is there in entrusting our entire lives to him?

So I ask: what areas of your life have you yet to fully give over to God? God loves you and wants to take care of you in those areas. God won't drop you or allow you to fall. Friends, God's perfect peace awaits us if we will but place our whole life into God's hands. Won't you put your life into his hands today and make the decision to grow again? The gift of God's peace – opened and discarded – is just waiting for us to finally receive it. What will you do? What will I do?

"You, Lord, give perfect peace to those who keep their purpose firm and put their trust in you. Trust in the Lord forever; God will always protect us."

Amen.