

## **“Peace on Earth”...the Real Meaning of Christmas**

***“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.”***

Tonight these words of Scripture will ring out throughout our community, our nation, and our world. I'd like to think that people will hear this Gospel truth because they're in church, where it is being ***rightly proclaimed and celebrated***. However, a recent Pew Research poll shows that only 51% of all adults will do anything church/religious related for Christmas Eve or Christmas Day. That means that roughly 49% of all American adults may not hear this Good News. ***But... not to fear!*** There's always the Charlie Brown Christmas special, which speaks these same exact words. Thank God for Charlie Brown. We may not have Duck Dynasty much longer, but we still have Charlie Brown...***for now***.

And that brings up a good question about this angelic Gospel message of peace on earth: ***What does this mean?*** How does the birth of Jesus over two thousand years ago equate to joy and peace for anyone ***today?*** Look around at the world you call home. There's not a whole lot of peace, is there? And understand: I'm not simply referring to bullets flying and car bombs and terrorism. That's what people often assume peace means—a simple cease-fire, but I'm calling you to look closer to home. ***Being a Christian in 21<sup>st</sup> century America is not exactly a peaceful endeavor.*** Dysfunction and divorce is the new normal in our land. There's nothing peaceful about these things. Infidelity, promiscuity, mistrust, betrayal, deceit...these aren't just words that describe the scripted plots of reality TV. These are words that describe the day-to-day ***sinfully chaotic world*** we live in and are a part of.

***Do you have peace?*** Many of us will say we do, yet we'll spend the next couple of months worrying and stressing over the bills we piled up this holiday recession season. We may speak of having ***“financial peace,”*** but our constant worries over our depleting retirement accounts and savings accounts, our never-ending bills, and the always-climbing prices of gas, milk, and life in general is anything but peaceful. Many of us will say we have peace, and yet we'll spend the next couple of days stewing and angry over one of our family members or friends who rubbed us the wrong way...at our Christmas get-together. ***“Peace? I can't be at peace while so-and-so isn't here. I can't be at peace while so-and-so is sick and lying in the hospital. I can't be at peace. This is the same time of year that my loved one passed away. Peace? Good cheer? Joy? I'm too stressed and depressed for any of that nonsense.”***

Sound familiar? ***'Tis the season!*** Folks: Why did Jesus come to earth to be born in a lowly manger in faraway Bethlehem? ***He came to live and die for our***

*sins. **That's it!*** That's the **whole** reason for the season, to use a popular cliché. He didn't come to make you independently wealthy or popular or carefree. Jesus came here specifically to pay for each and every one of our sins. In Christ, God was physically doing something about sin. He was breaking into this fallen and sinful world and saving us from the bonds of sin, death, and the devil, using His own Son as the ransom payment. Look into that manger through your eyes of faith, if you can, and you will see a tiny little baby staring up at you. ***That's God's unconditional gift of love in the flesh! That's God's plan of salvation for you!***

And that's just it. God's unconditional gift and plan doesn't *end* with just a tiny little baby in a manger, does it? God's gift of love in that manger has a very specific purpose and mission. ***God's love in the flesh necessarily moves from the nativity to Calvary.*** His gift of love ultimately looks like a beaten and bloodied man hanging lifeless from a cursed cross. My friends: Our salvation begins at the manger, but this cross is where we are ***ultimately saved!*** "It is finished" were Jesus' last words of victory, spoken from the cross, not His first words spoken from the cradle. This cross of Jesus Christ ***IS*** God's gift of love for us! This is the very definition of true joy, cheer, and peace that surpasses all human understanding.

So...that brings us to another good question before we close: ***What if...?*** What if you are struggling with the pains of family dysfunction or divorce? Can you still have the peace of Christ? What if your loved one has bailed on you once again and not come out to worship their Lord and Savior, even though you raised them with worship of Christ at the center of the Christmas season? Can you still have the full peace of Christ in your life? ***What if you are struggling with bills, with sickness, with depression, with all of the above, and perhaps even more?*** Can you still have and know the peace that angels proclaimed two-thousand years ago and we still proclaim tonight?

My fellow beloved children of God: This is our celebration this evening! Regardless of whatever the world, the devil, and our fallen flesh may throw at us, we still have the peace of Christ Jesus; the complete forgiveness of all sin and the free gift of eternal salvation. ***None of our chaotic sinful realities changes what God did for us and is still doing for us in the person of Jesus Christ.*** That's what makes our celebration so different. We celebrate peace, not as an ***absence*** of all trial and tribulation, but in the ***midst*** of trial and tribulation, celebrating the fact that we belong to Christ and nothing can ever take that away from us. We don't just celebrate the fact that a cute and cuddly little baby was born so long ago in a manger far, far away, as wonderful as that is, but we celebrate and honor the fact that Almighty God Himself came down from Heaven and took on our flesh so that our flesh, ***God's creation***, may be ***redeemed and restored*** to a right and holy relationship with Him. God's almighty and eternal plan of salvation for us

involved the simplicity of a virgin's womb; the simplicity of a baby's flesh, bone, and blood that was raised up into adulthood for the *sole purpose* of taking that very flesh, bone, and blood to the cross of Calvary as an all-redeeming sacrifice to His Heavenly Father for all mankind.

In this way, through the lens of the cross, we can rightly recognize the true *joy and peace of Christmas*. The true joy and peace of Christmas has *everything* to do with God's unconditional gift to us; the giving of Jesus as a full and complete sacrifice to a world that has nothing to offer in return; nothing but humble thanks and praise. *Our joy; our peace is not located in check books or credit cards or gifts that are bought and paid for with our silver, our gold, or our blood, sweat and tears*. Our joy and peace will not be found around the punch bowl or the shrimp platter with people we haven't seen in a while. It is nice to get together, but none of those people and none of those things can pay for a single sin, let alone an eternity's worth of sin. *Our true Christian joy and peace is found only in the gift of life that is ours in Christ Jesus alone, which He bought and paid for unconditionally with His holy and precious blood, sweat, and tears*.

May this divine gift of God's peace, which surpasses all human understanding, and which is God's absolutely free and unmerited gift to you—*no strings attached*—may it guard and keep you not only tonight, but unto life everlasting with the greatest gift of all—*the unconditional gift of God's love made flesh*—Jesus Christ.

A very merry Christmas to each and every one of you.

AMEN