

*The Holiness Of God: At Long Last, Peace*

*By Jason Huff*

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*Luke 24:36-49*

Our Scripture reading today is from Luke 24:36-49. Listen now to God's holy, perfect, and redeeming Word. "While they [the disciples] were still talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost. He said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have." When he had said this, he showed them his hands and feet. And while they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement, he asked them, "Do you have anything here to eat?" They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate it in their presence. He said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms." Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, "This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.""

We are living in the most peaceful time in history. That's hard to believe, of course, but it's true. Since 1950, we have on a world scale become the most peaceful the planet has ever been. There are statistically far fewer deaths due to violence. Modern society has far less violence than what was experienced by our ancestors. Until the pandemic, America's murder rate was the lowest it had been in 100 years.

While those facts are almost incontrovertible, wars of all sorts are everywhere. Turn on any news channel and hear about the atrocities going on in a literal war in Ukraine. Politicians are at war with each other over the direction of the country, and many of us engage in that war too. COVID divided us into more camps. Read the comments on almost any online article and we see that we are still at war with one another; those wars have just taken a different turn. We may follow the Old Testament rule not to murder one another, but each news cycle shows us how far we are from keeping Jesus' command to love one another, especially our enemies.

It proves that the biggest war of all is not with flesh and blood, but with sin. Our disobedience to God plunged us into a world of temptations and lusts and appetites totally contrary to God's intentions for us. We're at war with who we were made to be. In our series over the last several weeks, we've talked about the holiness of God – His infinite glory, wonder, and power, how it defines Him, and how all His other attributes ranging from love and mercy and grace to justice and even wrath are held perfectly in harmony by His holiness. His holiness presents a problem for us in that even if we should want to, even if by God's grace we should not reject Him utterly but want to restore a relationship with God – something that God Himself would have to initiate and bring to fruition in our hearts – we could not approach God due to His holiness. His holiness and sinfulness cannot be in the same place at the same time. When some foolish people throughout history tried it, the price was always far too much to pay.

Thankfully, God Himself made a way for us to approach Him. While He gave His chosen people the Israelites a temporary way to cover their sins, in Jesus He gave us a once-for-all solution. Where the ancient sacrifices had to be repeated over and over again, Jesus' sacrifice, being perfect in every way, bridging the gap between God and man because He was both God and man, could cover every sin for all time. In Jesus' death, we find restoration. Our sins are no longer in the accounting books on our side of the ledger. Jesus has erased them and the debt for them we could never pay is paid in full. And what's more, Jesus does not give Himself merely for us to be called righteous. Because of the power of His gift to us, through the Holy Spirit we start being made truly like Him. We start becoming holy ourselves, not in our own righteousness but through the righteousness granted to us by Jesus.

Easter is the proof that Jesus was telling the truth – that He is in fact the Savior of all He brings into the Kingdom of heaven. Easter shows that sin and death no longer have the final word. The Kingdom of God has triumphed and the imprisoning chains of sin have no power any longer. For the Christian, Easter takes away our fear of death, for we know what God has in store for us. God, who has been working in our hearts, changing us, convicting us, loving us, guiding us, leading us, will be with us always, only more real, more immanent, more perfectly. We live on this side of eternity now and only get the faintest glimpses of Him; because of Easter, we know we shall see Him as He is and rejoice in His presence forever. We get a glimpse of that joy in today's passage at the disciples see Jesus for the first time after His resurrection.

At long last, there is peace with God. In Acts 10, the apostle Peter says, "You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, telling the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all." As Paul puts in Romans 5:1-2, "Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand." As he concludes his letter to the Romans, Paul says, "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." Encouraging the church in Philippi, Paul writes, "Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me -- put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you." And in most of his letters, Paul writes this greeting – "Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." Wherever we turn, we find that Jesus Christ came to give us peace with God.

That's the good news! That's the reason we celebrate today. No matter what wars are going around us, culture wars or political wars or personal battles or anything else, we can have peace with God. His peace is so much more fulfilling than just an end to violence, which is what we think of most when we think of peace. His peace is completeness, fulfillment, knowing that God is preparing you for His Kingdom and has given you eternal life. Only God's peace can make you whole.

So the question for us today is, why might we not have peace? We may agree with everything we've heard today and still think, "I just don't feel that peace of God." During our remaining time together today, we're going to talk about why you might not have the peace of God promised to us, why you still might find the holiness of God terrifying and not a blessing. My goal is that by the time we leave today, you might know God's peace.

First thing we need to recognize: *the gospel is a proclamation of truth we obey as much as we believe*. It might seem weird to us that we have to “obey” good news, but Paul and Peter both write how we must obey the gospel. The best way we can understand what “believing in a proclamation” means is to realize that the gospel is a truth; how you respond to it is a choice, but your choice doesn’t affect its truthfulness.

When we say that Jesus was perfect, that He lived a perfect life, died a perfect death, and was resurrected from the grave, those are facts. You can believe them or not; that’s the choice. But they remain facts regardless of what you think about them. No matter what you think about California or Texas or Illinois, they are states in our union. No matter what you think about the roundness of the Earth, doesn’t change the facts.

But facts often don’t change us very much. Believing there is a war in Ukraine doesn’t mean much. We can see it on the news; we feel it at the gas pump and at the grocery store. It’s a painful event for us in a different way than it is for the Ukrainians. And yet, for most people, knowing it’s happening and believing it’s happening don’t change much about our daily lives. We might send some money to a relief organization; we might help in some way. But most beliefs don’t change our lives. They are just things we believe to be true, but they’re about as useful to most of us as knowing pi to 5 decimal places.

But the gospel is different. Sometimes it is presented as something to know. Receive Jesus; believe these are the facts; say you’re a sinner and pray for forgiveness, and you’re good. But that’s not the way this proclamation is supposed to work itself out. It’s not the way to truly have peace with God. It’s not how the gospel has been presented over the centuries.

It’s better to think of it in the same way ancient people thought of it. Imagine it this way – a royal decree is announced in town that the King is coming to visit the village. He brings with Him gifts for all who welcome Him. And so the people do everything necessary to have a feast ready upon His arrival. They clean their homes, wear their best clothes, kill the best of the flocks, so that when the King comes he receives a royal welcome. This still happens today – if you saw the recent *Downton Abbey* movie, much of the runtime is concerned with the entire household preparing for the queen to come visit!

In the same way, when we have genuine, saving faith in the proclamation of the good news of Jesus, it will result in action. If we believe that Jesus our King has saved us from sin and death, that He is alive and well and will be coming again to take us home, then we want to have a royal welcome ready for Him. And instead of pulling out the good china and vacuuming every carpet, we prepare our hearts. We live for Him. We follow His lead – we become disciples who listen for His voice and follow His instructions. We see a turnaround in our hearts as we cooperate with the Holy Spirit. The gospel is proclamation that the King defeated death and is coming to take us to our eternal home – so we need to be ready, and our readiness comes in living for Him.

Now let's be clear – we aren't saved by our works. The apostle Paul tells us as much in Ephesians 2:8-9, that we are saved by God's grace through faith and not by works, so no one can boast. It is our faith that saves us. But genuine faith leads us to prepare for the King. We obey Jesus' words because we believe them. We do not agree to a set of facts that makes no difference to us; that's not saving belief. Saving belief is knowing that Jesus is alive, knowing that Jesus will save all those who put their trust in Him, and then truly doing that trusting through our lives. That's the way to peace with God.

Maybe you're here today and you believe in God. That's a good first step. Maybe you believe the good news in your head – that Jesus really did live a perfect life and die on the cross and was raised again to life, all so that God's people could be counted as righteous and live with Him forever. Also a good step. But that belief is not just facts to know because they don't come alone – they come with the obligation to become a follower of Jesus. If you want peace with God and you don't have it, maybe it's because you have the knowledge of the facts but not the connection to your heart and life and actions. And so I ask you today – search your heart. If you've truly become a disciple living each day for Jesus, that's great! And if not, turn your life over to Him today. Let the facts you know become the faith you live by.

There's also a second part of the puzzle that can keep you from peace with God, another one you can deal with today: *the gospel is a proclamation for the new people of God to form a new community called the church*. While we must personally believe and follow the gospel, the message is meant for communities and to be lived out in community. In today's passage, Jesus states that the gospel is to be preached in His name to all nations. He doesn't say "all persons" or "all individuals." It's nations. In the book of Revelation, chapter 14, verse 6, it talks about the gospel going out to every nation, tribe, tongue, and people. When Jesus gave His great commission to His disciples right before He ascended to heaven, He told them to make disciples of all nations.

We can't get away from the fact that the good news is proclaimed to peoples; to groups; and the end result is the creation of new people, God's people, who come together as the church. God never intended solo Christians. When God called Abraham centuries ago to follow Him, His promise to Abraham was to make Him a nation. Now God is creating a new nation of Abraham, a new nation of believers.

The pandemic has made church very different. We've gotten used to being online. I would have never thought in a million years that I'd become a high-tech televangelist, but that's what many pastors have become over the last two years! And we know we have new friends from our online endeavors. People who weren't a part of a church, who maybe hadn't put their faith and trust in Christ, they've heard and learned and made the online version of CrossWay a part of their lives. And I'm so grateful for that.

But we are also called to be the people of God, supporting one another. Long before the time of online church, as far back as the early church, people sometimes had a hard time with it. As the author of Hebrews said, "Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another." The truth is, we need one another to truly be the people of God that God calls us to be; we cannot do it alone.

Many people think that faith is a solo sport, like a marathon. But really, faith is meant to be something closer to baseball. Now when I was young, I lived in a neighborhood with a lot of condos, a fair number of kids, and we all liked to play baseball. Problem was, we probably had nine or ten kids at the best of times; usually it was maybe four.

Have you ever tried to play baseball with two teams of two? It doesn't go very well. We usually wound up playing some variant of catch and tag because it was just impossible to play with just two people on a team, even if the batter threw the ball up in the air themselves to hit it. You need someone at each base just to get runners out. You need people in the outfield to retrieve long balls. You need a pitcher and a catcher. And if you know anything about baseball, you know you need specific people with specific talents at specific positions. You don't want a guy who can't throw at third base trying to get the ball all the way across the diamond to first. You need someone who can catch anything at first. Every position requires its own abilities.

In the same way, none of us is meant to be on this faith journey alone. We need one another. My gift is in preaching and teaching and music. Now those things come in very handy when you're leading a worship service! But there are plenty of areas I'm not so good at, and no one person can handle all the tasks alone. I need Curt and Vicki setting up communion. I need Tracy helping with the music. I need my readers helping leading us on Sunday mornings, and I need my elders providing guidance and spiritual support. I need faithful deacons like Annetta who writes birthday and anniversary cards and Catha who seems to know when one of us needs a personal connection. We need each other; we need your gifts. I would love to see the ministry of CrossWay expand so more people come to know Jesus, that more people can see the love of God through our outreach and support, and that can only happen as we come together as the people of God.

And believers need each other. When things get tough in life, we are not meant to be lone guns, "just me and Jesus" kind of people. Individualism is not the highest priority in the Kingdom of God; caring for one another is. When we hit those "Jesus, take the wheel" moments in life, God often intends another believer to be the one to come alongside us and take the wheel on Jesus' behalf. That only happens when we are in relationship with one another in a church that truly cares for one another. Sometimes people are hurt by a church that's not functioning the way God intends; we understand that. But sometimes, when God seems far away, God intends for us to see Him in the faces of His people each week and remember that He cares for us, and find our peace knowing God has provided a place for us – not just a place in heaven for eternity with Him, but a place here and now among His faithful people who love one another.

And so, if you haven't committed to being a part of God's people, if you know God is calling you to more, calling you to peace with Himself, I encourage you, commit to being part of the local church. If this is where you're from, being a part of CrossWay; if you're from farther way, being a part of a faithful church where your gifts are celebrated and your faith supported.

Friends, today is the day we celebrate God's peace given to us in Christ, raised from the dead. May we know that peace as we live our lives for Him, living as part of His community of faith, enjoying the knowledge that our sins are forgiven and our place in God's Kingdom is secure.